

**Seamus Heaney and the Aesthetics of Enlightenment**

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*in memoriam May Gallagher, 1938-2019*

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S. R. A.

*Sion Mills*  
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## Abstract

This thesis seeks to offer a picture of enlightenment in Seamus Heaney's twelve major volumes of poetry, arguing that they reveal an unfolding record of self-directed, and increasingly self-aware, spiritual enquiry, one that is informed by a wide range of Eastern and Western traditions of metaphysics, mysticism and theology. Convinced that poetry constitutes a unique category of spiritual activity, Heaney was—above all else—a seeker after enlightenment who appropriately earned a reputation as 'a mystic of the ordinary'.<sup>1</sup> In this context, I suggest that his poetic oeuvre can be read in the form of a triptych. The first phase reflects his own suggestion that *Death of a Naturalist*, *Door into the Dark*, *Wintering Out* and *North* comprise 'one book', a book that is framed by two major self-portraits: 'Personal Helicon', which projects into darkness, and 'Exposure', which anticipates raised sights and the possibility of transcendence in the image of the missed comet. The second phase tests various approaches towards this elusive end: the Romantic intimations of *Field Work*; the defamiliarized vision of Ireland in *Station Island*; the apophatic *via negativa* of *The Haw Lantern*; finally, the visionary *claritas* of *Seeing Things*, with its vivid depictions of three-dimensional space, the eternal Now, and Heraclitean flux. The third and last phase—comprising *The Spirit Level*, *Electric Light*, *District and Circle*, and *Human Chain*—sees the penetrative ambitions of the spiritual seeker replaced by the circuitousness of meditative reflection. Attendant structural motifs of circularity, self-referentiality and foreknowledge are repeatedly inscribed in the fabric of the poet's later work, as spiritual maturity leads to a greater emphasis on contemplation and acceptance.

<sup>1</sup> John Montague, 'A friend who realised his destiny in full', *The Irish Times*, 7 September 2013 <<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/a-friend-who-realised-his-destiny-in-full-1.1517533>> [accessed February 2016].

## List of Abbreviations

Titles of books frequently referred to, especially Heaney's individual volumes of poetry and four collected volumes of prose essays. Unless otherwise stated, Heaney's major volumes of poetry and collections of prose are published by Faber and Faber, London.

- AS     *Among Schoolchildren: A Public Lecture Given By Seamus Heaney on 9 June 1983*  
(Belfast: Queen's University Belfast, 1984)
- DC     *District and Circle*
- DD     *Door into the Dark*
- DN     *Death of a Naturalist*
- EI     'Envies and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet', *Irish University Review*,  
Vol. 15, No. 1. Spring (1985).
- EL     *Electric Light*
- FK     *Finders Keepers*
- FW     *Field Work*
- GT     *The Government of the Tongue*
- HC     *Human Chain*
- HL     *The Haw Lantern*
- N     *North*
- P     *Preoccupations*
- PW     *The Place of Writing* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1989)
- RP     *The Redress of Poetry*
- SI     *Station Island*
- SL     *The Spirit Level*
- SS     *Stepping Stones*
- ST     *Seeing Things*
- WO     *Wintering Out*

## 1. Heaney and Enlightenment: Introduction

In 1982, RTÉ produced a television documentary entitled *Joyce, Yeats and Wilde: Seamus Heaney and Richard Ellmann in Conversation*. Though the programme was intended to celebrate three of Ireland's most internationally recognised writers, it is not difficult to see how RTÉ's producers were acutely aware of the significance of a conversation between Heaney and Ellmann recorded at various landmarks around Dublin city. At that juncture, Ellmann was established as the preeminent biographer of James Joyce, as well as an authority on W.B. Yeats and Oscar Wilde, while Heaney—who had moved south ten years before—had confirmed his status as a major poet with the publication of his highly controversial book, *North*, in which he addresses the wave of politically motivated violence that struck Northern Ireland from the late 1960s. The sense of occasion permeating the documentary, then, owed as much, if not more, to the interlocutors themselves as it did to their putative subject.

One particularly significant part of the conversation is when Heaney and Ellmann, stood together at Sandymount Green, discuss Yeats's poetic legacy. Ellmann refers to Heaney's essay, 'Yeats as an Example?'—published only two years earlier in *Preoccupations*—and invites him to elaborate on its terms. Heaney begins with a general appreciation of Yeats's accomplishments ('Yeats had the gift of establishing authority first of all by achievement, but secondly by a conduct which was majestic in some way'), but he concludes with a judgement that expresses his own priorities at that time: 'I think that the poet has to not get caught in a position where he is answerable to the politician, but where in some way the politician is under his spiritual gaze'.<sup>1</sup> Only three years earlier Heaney had published *Field Work*, his fifth book of poetry, which, given its focus on 'mysteries' (FW 43),

<sup>1</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in *Joyce, Yeats and Wilde: Seamus Heaney and Richard Ellmann in Conversation*, RTÉ Productions, 1982. Ronald Schuchard has also partly transcribed the documentary in his introduction to *The Place of Writing* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1989), pp. 2-16, p. 11.

seems very much part of his attempt to develop such a perspective. Heaney's inclusion in the documentary appears not only based on his status as a renowned Irish writer, then, but also on a growing sense that he was developing into the kind of spiritual aspirant that Ellmann patently admired. Three years after the documentary, in 1985, Ellmann contributed a review of *Station Island* to *The New York Review of Books* in which he contrasts Heaney's 'less clamant philosophy' to Yeats's grand Olympian figures. Given Heaney's 'unportentuous vision', Ellmann argues, it is fitting that, in the final stanzas of the 'Station Island' sequence in the book, the poet-pilgrim should find his model 'not in Yeats, constantly trying to break through the façade of what is, but in Joyce, who "found the living world enough" if sufficiently epiphanized'.<sup>2</sup> To epiphanize meant, for Joyce, 'a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself'.<sup>3</sup> Ellmann's hunch that comparable spiritual aspirations formed the core of Heaney's literary art was, as this thesis will demonstrate, verified by the trajectory of the his poetic oeuvre.

Though his background might lead us to expect that Catholicism would be the dominant framework in which such aspirations find their expression, the mood, language and syncretic tendencies of Heaney's writing consistently gesture beyond his inherited religion. Given this fact, it is helpful to interpret the impulse towards spiritual enlightenment in his work by comparing it to *philosophia perennis*, a perspective which seeks to identify the universal source of enlightenment that unites all contemplative and philosophical traditions. In *The Perennial Philosophy*, Aldous Huxley describes his subject as 'the metaphysic that recognises a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical to, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground

<sup>2</sup> Richard Ellmann, 'Heaney Agonistes', *New York Times*, 14 March 1985  
 <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1985/03/14/heaney-agonistes>> [accessed September 2015].

<sup>3</sup> James Joyce, *Stephen Hero* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1956), p. 216.



of all being'.<sup>4</sup> Although such terms appear to contradict what Ellmann called Heaney's 'less clamant philosophy' and 'unportentuous vision', the pursuit of enlightenment through the contemplation of a 'transcendent ground of Being' can, in fact, be applied to this poet's metaphysical ambitions: he sought to apprehend, as he says in 'Alphabets', "'a figure of the universe | And not just single things'" (HL 4). The theoretical perspective of this thesis is also informed by Louis MacNeice's analysis of mysticism in *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*:

Mysticism, in the narrow sense, implies a specific experience which is foreign to most poets and most men, but on the other hand it represents an instinct which is a human *sine qua non*. Both the poet and the 'ordinary man' are mystics incidentally and there is a mystical sanction or motivation for all their activities which are not purely utilitarian (possibly, therefore, *all* their activities, as it is doubtful whether any one does anything purely for utility).<sup>5</sup>

MacNeice applies this theory to his distinction between the mystic and the poet. The mystic transcends the distinctions and consciousness of the ego, merging his or her oneness into the cosmos; the poet, like ordinary men, lives at an intermediate stage since he is obliged to articulate and therefore must make distinctions, while the logical outcome of mysticism is silence. A poem may seek to provide a bridge to the Unknown, but it is a bridge essentially constructed in terms of the known. Mystics who write poetry must descend from the higher plane: the sense of union with what is, the fusion between subject and object, must be translated into the language of this world. The poet, operating in the world of distinctions, can only transcend this imaginatively on the page, with that world being at best a fiction (ibid., 24-25). As MacNeice would have pointed out, Heaney was not a mystic in the sense

<sup>4</sup> Aldous Huxley, 'Introduction', *The Perennial Philosophy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1947), p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Louis MacNeice, 'Preface', *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (London: Faber and Faber, 1941), pp. 15-16.

that, say, John of the Cross was a mystic, but like the Spaniard, he repined for and claimed intuitive knowledge of an eternal fountain of illumination; in his translation of the saint's 'Song of the Soul that Rejoices in Knowing God by Faith', Heaney passionately affirms both the elusiveness of enlightened perception and also his own mystical predisposition: 'How well I know that fountain, filling, running, | although it is the night' (*SI* 89).

This thesis will first provide an analysis of Heaney's critical reflections on spiritual enlightenment in art. The bulk of the poet's prose is collected in five books: *Preoccupations*, *The Government of the Tongue*, *The Redress of Poetry*, *The Place of Writing*, and *Finders Keepers*; a broadly chronological approach to Heaney's individual essays and lectures on the nature of enlightenment, as well as supporting evidence drawn from interviews and public commentary, illustrates his developing thought on the subject over the course of almost half a century. In the middle phase of his oeuvre, Heaney promulgated 'the necessity of an idea of transcendence' (*AS* 16) and metaphysical idealism (*GT* 3). Poetry, he argued in the 1986 T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures, was 'its own reality' (*GT* 101), an aesthetic medium by which to penetrate a realm distinct from history. The imagination in its strongest manifestation, he wrote in the inaugural Ellmann lectures in 1988, 'imposes its vision upon a place rather than accepts a vision from it' (*PW* 20). Yet he also recognised in the Ellmann lectures that this visionary imposition is 'never exempt from the imagination's antithetical ability to subvert its own creation' (*ibid*), a symptom of the acceptance that would mark his poetry from that point onwards. In his Oxford lectures, he developed the conception of 'inclusiveness consciousness' (*RP* 8), a state of higher consciousness, as I hope to show, that corresponds to similar ideas also written by Ellmann. But by the close of the century Heaney had argued, paradoxically, that enlightenment should not be sought after, claiming that spiritual

sustenance is essentially a form of grace.<sup>6</sup> In a late essay on Wordsworth revised for publication in 2008, moreover, he would go further still by suggesting that the terms which one uses to describe spiritual experiences do not equal what he calls participation in our ‘solemn order of reality’.<sup>7</sup>

The spiritual dimension of Heaney’s work has rarely gone unnoticed, although concepts of enlightenment have not been a central focus; more often his poetry is ‘closely linked with the religious impulse’,<sup>8</sup> as Elmer Kennedy-Andrews put it, and frequently with Catholicism. Henry Hart’s monograph *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions* implicitly frames the poet, as its title suggests, in the literary-spiritual tradition of William Blake, who in *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* wrote: ‘Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence’.<sup>9</sup> Hart also draws extensively on the mystics to discuss what he calls the ‘meditative’ function of Heaney’s art, quoting from a private letter that recalls how, at St Columb’s College, he read the spiritual writers including St John of the Cross and St Theresa, Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*, and how at Queen’s University, Belfast, he read Evelyn Underhill’s *Mysticism*. Most important in Hart’s estimation, is Heaney’s remark elsewhere in the letter: ‘I read, in a pious spirit’, Heaney writes, ‘*Seeds of Contemplation* by Thomas Merton’.<sup>10</sup> Hart finds much in Merton’s text to associate with Heaney’s early spiritualization of darkness: the book ‘affirms the purgatorial journey through darkness that

<sup>6</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in *Sources: Letters from Irish People on Sustenance for the Soul*, edited by Marie Heaney (Dublin: Townhouse, 1999), p. 160.

<sup>7</sup> Seamus Heaney, “‘Apt Admonishment’: Wordsworth as an Example”, *Literary Awakenings: Personal Essays from the Hudson Review*, edited by Ronald Koury (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2017), p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, ‘The Gift and the Craft’, *All the Realm of Whisper: The Poetry of Seamus Heaney* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1988), p. 16.

<sup>9</sup> William Blake, ‘The Argument’, *Poems of William Blake*, edited by W.B. Yeats (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1905), p. 177.

<sup>10</sup> Seamus Heaney, Letter to Henry Hart [4 June 1987], quoted in Henry Hart, ‘The Poetry of Meditation’, *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1992), p. 35.

culminates in transcendent illumination, the paradoxical death that is “the entrance into a higher life””. He further draws on the passage of Merton’s book which outlines the value of contemplation: ‘Contemplation is always beyond our knowledge, beyond dialogue, beyond our own self’.<sup>11</sup> In this way, Heaney’s work illustrates ‘the soul’s deliberate renunciation of the ordinary lights of reason and social convention along the mystical way’.<sup>12</sup> But Hart also argues that Heaney is ‘more iconoclastic than Merton’ since Heaney puts this practice to ‘secular and poetic ends’. Heaney attempts to obtain ‘transcendent clarity to obtain a better view of the ground he is trying, often foolishly, to transcend’ (ibid., 36). Hart’s work is particularly useful for conceptualising the oblique place of enlightenment in Heaney’s early work, but he does not fully explore or isolate for concern the spiritual dimension of Heaney’s thought, opting to focus instead on the ‘deconstructive’ aspect of *The Haw Lantern*, which he calls Heaney’s most sustained attack on the binary oppositions that have stratified and oppressed his community in the past and tracing them, as Jacques Derrida and others have done, back to the Platonic and Juedo-Christian origins of Western civilisation’ (ibid., 7). Hart’s study is limited by the absence of *Seeing Things*, the major source of context for Heaney’s spiritual ambitions and development.

Surprisingly, Daniel Tobin’s *Passage to the Centre: Imagination and the Sacred Centre in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney* is still the only full-length study to date of the development of the metaphysical and ontological subject matter of Heaney’s poetry, and as such, its thesis warrants close attention.<sup>13</sup> Drawing upon the philosophy of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Paul Ricouer, Tobin claims that the image of the sacred centre stands as

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (Norfolk: New Connections, 1972), p. 2, quoted in Henry Hart, ‘The Poetry of Meditation’, *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1992), p. 35.

<sup>12</sup> Henry Hart, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 35.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Tobin, *Passage to the Center: Imagination and the Sacred in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998, 1999).

the governing trope in the poet's body of work which, at the time of its publication in a revised edition in 1998, included as its latest volume *The Spirit Level*. Heaney's search for a sacred centre, Tobin says, can be compared and contrasted to Derrida's theory of 'an ethic of nostalgia for origins [...] of archaic and natural innocence, of a purity of presence and self-presence', but better understood instead in light of Foucault's suggestion that the return to origin is not merely nostalgic but a necessary act of transformation and discursivity, as well as Paul Ricoeur's similar observation that one must be 'compelled to return to the roots of identity, to the mythical nucleus that ultimately grounds and determines it' (ibid., 10). For Tobin, Heaney's 'self-conscious return to origins' has a transformative and generative effect: 'Heaney's quest evolves inside the question of the centre, with all its religious and metaphysical affiliations, and so the recurrence of the centre through various guises and tropes escapes the guilt and nostalgia of supplementarity' (ibid., 10). Tobin contends that the poet's use of the centre trope contributes to an open 'cumulative vision' which, like the religious instinct, 'demands that we must confront what concerns us ultimately'—meaning, the critic intimates, consciously developing a theory of reality (ibid., 40). He also attempts to sketch out the circularity of what he calls Heaney's 'ongoing rite of passage, an imaginative journey in which the strait between worlds becomes commensurate with the evolution of the poet's consciousness' (ibid., 46). Tobin thus understands Heaney's sense of history as moving cyclically rather than chronologically. 'Understood in terms of cycles,' he says, 'history is not chronology at all, but an enwoven tapestry of recurrences in which the shaping events of communities repeat themselves' (ibid., 53-54).

While circularity certainly informs Heaney's late work, Tobin's controlling narrative of the 'sacred centre' is ultimately restrictive insofar as it does not account for the different topographical dynamics of the volumes which he discusses (and, even more so, of the volumes that were written subsequently). In *Station Island*, for instance, the poet moves

beyond his focus on the sacred centre of the pilgrimage circuit when he takes flight on a more unpredictable, tangential course in ‘Sweeney Redivivus’, a sequence that begins by straying away from the centre and ‘into the margin’ (SI 97). *The Haw Lantern* includes similar imagery of centrifugal movement, for example ‘The Spoonbait’ which envisages the soul ‘risen and free and spooling out of nowhere — | A shooting star going back up the darkness’ (HL 21). The second part of *Seeing Things* ends with a view of the ‘offing’, the distant part of the sea (ST 108). *The Spirit Level* not only focuses on the upward trajectory of an aeroplane (‘a late jet out of Dublin, its risen light | Winking ahead of what it hauls away’), but describes the idea of the ‘centre’ as ‘hollow’ (SL 22). When we turn to the later volumes beyond the timeframe of Tobin’s study, the idea of a sacred centre becomes less significant as an element of Heaney’s aesthetics of enlightenment. *District and Circle* evokes the wider expanses of otherworldly landscapes (‘To Mick Joyce in Heaven’, ‘To George Seferis in the Underworld’, ‘Cavafy’: ‘The rest I’ll speak of to the ones below in Hades’) and shows a particular reverence for random objects (‘The Turnip-Snedder’, ‘Helmet’, ‘Poet to Blacksmith’, ‘A Scuttle for Dorothy Wordsworth’, ‘A Stone Lid for W.H. Auden’). *Electric Light*, not unlike *District and Circle*, focuses on the outward trajectory of light (‘At Toomebridge’, ‘Vitruviana’). *Human Chain* concludes with an image of a kite broken off from its string and flying out of reach: ‘The kite takes off, itself alone, a windfall’ (HC 85). The dominant movement of Heaney’s imagery becomes (after Weil) increasingly defiant of all gravitational pulls towards the centre. This opposing evidence, then, undermines the relevance of both the spatial metaphor and the branches of philosophy upon which Tobin bases his reading. Equally problematic is that Tobin’s methodology effectively ignores Heaney’s syncretic tendency which, I hope to show, is essential to appreciating the ways in which the poet’s pursuit of spiritual transcendence manifests and develops over time.

Unsurprisingly, Catholicism and Christianity have emerged as a key framework for more recent attempts to understand the spiritual aspect of Heaney's work. In *Northern Irish Poetry and Theology*, Gail McConnell argues that Heaney's aesthetics are predominantly influenced by Catholicism (albeit hybridized with the New Criticism), and that he conceptualized himself as a Catholic poet-priest who attempted to write a 'secular theology'.<sup>14</sup> The main problem with McConnell's interpretation is that it does not allow for Heaney's awareness of spiritual traditions beyond Catholic theology. In isolating Catholicism, she has created a reductive metonym whereby Heaney's spiritual explorations are confined within the framework of a doctrinal faith which he ultimately suspected of providing him not with true spiritual experience, but with merely 'compensatory' language.<sup>15</sup> McConnell's claim that the poet 'believes the theology of transubstantiation' is flatly denied by Heaney in *Stepping Stones*, where he states that he believed in neither transubstantiation nor Real Presence (SS 234). This failure to grasp both the poet's scepticism and his broader aspirations surely lies in the attempt to circumscribe in specific terms (Catholic modes of signification and the 'verbal icon' of New Criticism) the essentially equivocal and explorative quality of his intuitive and idiosyncratic mysticism. It is surprising that McConnell also fails to acknowledge the ramifications of his conscious effort to depart from ingrained Catholic pieties through 'Station Island', where the poet not only encounters the ghosts of William Carleton, Patrick Kavanagh and James Joyce, each of whom mock from their individual perspectives the metaphysical value of the pilgrimage, but also a Catholic priest who Heaney himself pejoratively describes as 'a holy mascot' (SI 71). McConnell's portrait of Heaney as a poet-priest of Catholicism and New Criticism is surely inadequate;

<sup>14</sup> Gail McConnell, "'Its flesh was sweet | Like thickened wine': Iconography and Sacramentalism in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney", *Northern Irish Poetry and Theology* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 96.

<sup>15</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in Henri Cole, 'Interview with Seamus Heaney', *The Art of Poetry*, No.75, *The Paris Review* < <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1217/seamus-heaney-the-art-of-poetry-no-75-seamus-heaney> > [accessed June 2015].

what is necessary is a less parochial examination of the syncretic impetus of his literary approach to enlightenment.

John Dennison provides a more nuanced approach to Heaney's Catholic and New Critical heritage in *Seamus Heaney and the Adequacy of Poetry*. Dennison, like McConnell, detects in Heaney's 'prose poetics' a quasi-religious trust in the arts as a source of spiritual illumination. Heaney's relation of poetry to reality, Dennison argues, mimics 'the Christian doctrine of salvation and the incarnation to a remarkable degree', but unlike McConnell, he locates this impulse in an Arnoldian substitution of Catholic orthodoxy with a humanist trust in the edifying power of literary art: Heaney's 'high account of the arts' world-mending powers is not so much co-extensive with Christian soteriology as finally delimited by the Biblical and theological descriptions it knowingly appropriates'; his trust in 'the adequacy of poetry composes a refracted afterimage of Christian doctrine, particularly that of the incarnation'.<sup>16</sup> Rather than paint Heaney as a priest, Dennison opts to explore this idea of adequacy using the perspective of what he calls the late humanist character and limits of the poet's 'fiduciary commitment' to the 'fundamental assumptions about the nature of reality and the attribution of value to reality' (ibid., 9). For Dennison, 'fiduciary' denotes the way in which Heaney's trust in poetry—its 'softly dogmatic structures, its scope and aspiration to offer a whole account, and its personal, confessional nature—*approximates* religious belief' (ibid). In this account, Heaney is described as extensively imitative of a Christian doctrine which is now, for him, defunct: in its 'knowing and effortful self-constitution, this fiduciary commitment sets itself against traditional Christian belief, in which epistemic and ontological claims are predicated on—and remain chastened and called forth by—God's self-revelation in Jesus of Nazareth' (ibid). From this standpoint, Dennison interrogates Heaney's body of criticism, with periodical references to the poetry, for what he discerns as the perceived

<sup>16</sup> John Dennison, *Seamus Heaney and the Adequacy of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 8.



guiding lights of transcendental humanism and latter-day Arnoldianism. There are some oversights in Dennison's picture of Heaney's career. Nowhere does he mention the defamiliarized vision of *Sweeney Astray*; the spirituality of sexual love that informs *Field Work* and 'Station Island' is passed over; the non-Western traditions that Heaney often gestures to are also somewhat neglected. Dennison argues that Buddhist ideals such as Śūnyatā offer little to explications of Heaney's work. But that metaphysical concept—of emptiness constituting the basic structure of the universe—is illuminating as a means to comprehend the spiritual development in, for example, 'Clearances' and 'The Wishing Tree'.<sup>17</sup> This failure to broaden the terms of reference also sees Dennison turn a blind eye to Heaney's embrace of the *via negativa*, a concept of ineffability and negation that is central to the development in *The Haw Lantern*, and the main topic of Heaney's Ellmann lectures in *The Place of Writing*. Dennison's emphasis on Christian and humanist terms fails to adequately accommodate the universal human impulses of Heaney's spirituality.

This is not to say that a Catholic-Christian emphasis cannot point to important truths of Heaney's quest for spiritual enlightenment, as John Desmond demonstrates in his introduction to *Gravity and Grace: Seamus Heaney and the Force of Light*. For Desmond, Heaney, like Czesław Miłosz and Simone Weil, shows a preference to considering man a metaphysical creature, 'a person who possesses a spiritual soul, personal freedom, and an innate drive for transcendence yet who is also rooted in the historical world'.<sup>18</sup> In this, Desmond makes a compelling distinction between the Jungian and Catholic dimensions of Heaney's work. Jung considers transcendental realities a projection of the mind, while Catholicism sees historical life as part of a vertical, transcendent dimension: Desmond sees

<sup>17</sup> John Dennison, *Seamus Heaney*, pp. 168-9. Dennison is referring to Michael Cavanagh's *Professing Poetry: Seamus Heaney's Poetics* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), pp. 196-7.

<sup>18</sup> John F. Desmond, *Gravity and Grace: Seamus Heaney and the Force of Light* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), p. 6.

Heaney's work as a struggle rooted both in 'the dynamic process of individuation and heightened consciousness, à la Jung', and the need to express in new ways 'the mysterious transcendent dimensions of reality, a key source of which is his early religious training' (ibid., 9). In this effort, Desmond writes, Heaney 'keeps a firm foothold in both the historical milieu and in the vertical, transcendent dimension of reality he learned in his early Catholic training, and in so doing he resists being encapsulated within a purely historical-cultural framework' (ibid., 12). On this basis that Desmond affirms the poet's 'realistic ontology' (ibid., 16), one based on the Heraclitean flux enshrined by 'The First Words'. It is a commendable reading of Heaney's spiritual enlightenment. But as Desmond himself has said, his work is not a sustained academic assessment; it is most obviously limited by its exclusive focus on *The Spirit Level*, as the critic hopes to evoke similarities between Heaney, Milosz, and Weil. Desmond arrives at useful conclusions, but he works from a very limited evidence base and thus neglects by default the developmental nature of Heaney's relationship with this subject matter.

Bruce Stewart has been alert to the changes in Heaney's spirituality, tracing a literary colloquy with Derek Mahon that sees both writers as belonging to 'a class of anti-metaphysical metaphysicians who combine all the trappings of agnosticism with all the yearnings of religion', Walter Pater's symbolist conception that, in Irish literature, embraces the work of Oscar Wilde, W. B. Yeats and James Joyce.<sup>19</sup> Mahon cannot abide poetry that evades 'the metaphysical unease in which all poetry of lasting value has its source,' as he makes clear in his introduction to *The Sphere Book of Irish Verse*.<sup>20</sup> He admires writers like Phillipe Jaccottet, who he describes as 'a secular mystic, an explorer of *le vrai lieu* ("the real

<sup>19</sup> Bruce Stewart, "'Visionary Gleams': The Metaphysical Colloquy of Derek Mahon and Seamus Heaney", *Études Irlandaises*, 38-1 (2013), p. 140.

<sup>20</sup> Derek Mahon, 'Introduction', *Sphere Book of Irish Poetry* (London: Sphere Books 1972), p. 12.

place”)).<sup>21</sup> For Stewart, when Heaney dedicated *Seeing Things* to Mahon, the poet was signalling his compliance with his friend’s advice in ‘Lives’: ‘Let him revise | His insolent ontology’.<sup>22</sup> Stewart sees Heaney’s dedication as evidence of a shared ‘secular mysticism’, a reading supported by Bernard O’Donoghue, who has argued that that epithet could have been the title of the book.<sup>23</sup> But Stewart’s essay is also limited, like Desmond’s, by its narrow focus: the emphasis on this particular literary relationship simplifies the developmental changes in Heaney’s spiritual outlook: he argues, for instance, that what set the two writers apart was Heaney’s sacerdotal confidence and Mahon’s attachment to the *via negativa*, a reading which—at first glance—seems broadly true, but less so when we turn to the aesthetics of negation in *The Haw Lantern*. Stewart also paints broad strokes: he identifies Heaney with Joyce and Mahon with Yeats on the basis of their religious backgrounds and commentary, which again feels convincing until one turns, as this thesis does, to the equally compelling similarities between Heaney and Yeats’s transitional periods on the road towards an organic corpus.

John Wilson Foster has perhaps been most observant of the internal narrative shaping Heaney’s spiritual agenda. In a short monograph on the poet in 1995, Foster suggested that Heaney, at that juncture in his career, was working towards the ‘the soul’s unity of being’; Heaney’s sense of division and his quest for synthesis, Foster concluded, ‘are Dante’s rational mysticism rendered in contemporary terms’.<sup>24</sup> By 2008, Foster was arguing, like Stewart, that Heaney had constructed a ‘theology’ from various sources, including Classical

<sup>21</sup> Derek Mahon, ‘Introduction’, *Selected Poems of Philippe Jaccottet* (London: Penguin, 1988), quoted in Bruce Stewart, “‘Visionary Gleams’: The Metaphysical Colloquy of Derek Mahon and Seamus Heaney”, p. 140.

<sup>22</sup> Derek Mahon, ‘Lives’, *Selected Poems 1962-1978*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 40-42, p. 2, quoted in Bruce Stewart, “‘Visionary Gleams’: The Metaphysical Colloquy of Derek Mahon and Seamus Heaney”, p. 143.

<sup>23</sup> Bruce Stewart, “‘Visionary Gleams’: The Metaphysical Colloquy of Derek Mahon and Seamus Heaney”, p. 140; Bernard O’Donoghue, *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry* (London: Harvester, 1994), p. 126.

<sup>24</sup> John Wilson Foster, *Seamus Heaney* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1995), p. 57.

mythology, pre-Christian models, medieval Catholicism, Romanticism, psychoanalytic theory, Eastern traditions, Eastern European philosophy, Iron Age Scandinavian pagan ritual, Irish sagas, and Norse mythology. In this ‘religious bricolage’, Foster writes, ‘the poet senses and seeks a faith that issues in poems but not in a single organised religious system’.<sup>25</sup> This thesis will share Foster’s appreciation of Heaney’s syncretic tendencies. In this context, the critic also offers an engaging definition of Heaney’s ‘faith’, analysing the verb ‘credit’ as it appears in ‘Fosterling’ (‘Me waiting until I was nearly fifty | To credit marvels’, *ST* 50):

In terms of faith, crediting is a lesser act than believing; it is to believe through an act of will, to give the unbelievable the benefit of the doubt; crediting is to make the world tell its marvels—to believe is to let the world show its marvels. Crediting is weighing credence against incredulity or scepticism and tipping the balance towards the venerable, traditional attitude of belief. Indeed, by willfully not believing too readily in marvels, one can seem to induce them and thus undermine one’s own disbelief.<sup>26</sup>

This suggestive analysis certainly accords with Heaney’s spiritual idealism in prose and public commentary, though I would suggest the trajectory of the poetry itself—after *Seeing Things*—suggests that he not only moves beyond the question of belief, but becomes increasingly deterministic. Later, Foster seems to recognise this development when he focuses on how Heaney’s completed oeuvre constitutes ‘a rich auto-mythography’, noting that the poet ‘chose to, or was compelled to, or was educated to, see life as the living out of a

<sup>25</sup> John Wilson Foster, ‘Crediting Marvels: Heaney After 50’, *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, edited by B. O’Donoghue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) pp. 206-223, p. 214.

<sup>26</sup> John Wilson Foster, ‘Crediting Marvels: Heaney After 50’, p. 223.

difficult but motif-ridden script already written'.<sup>27</sup> From *The Spirit Level* to *Human Chain*, there is indeed a progression of structural circularity and emphasis on foreknowledge.

Like Gaul, Heaney's growth in the twelve major volumes can be 'divided | Into three parts' (ST 26), although this admittedly runs the risk of becoming 'lines pegged out in the garden' (ST 8-9), marking too artificially the outline of a tripartite structure against the organic whole of the work. Some critics have argued that it is too early to say what shape Heaney's work has taken, and that any attempt to feel for clues will inevitably lead to simplification.<sup>28</sup> But Heaney made explicit statements about a structural dynamic in his work as early as 1979: 'I wasn't sure what shape I wanted to pop out of those first four books [*Death of a Naturalist*, *Door into the Dark*, *Wintering Out*, *North*]. I'm certain that up to *North*, that was one book; in a way, it grows together and goes together'.<sup>29</sup> When, in 1981, Haffenden asked him if he was thinking about an overall design for the oeuvre, the poet responded: 'I would by now be bold enough to say that I am'.<sup>30</sup> He was not bold enough to suggest what that design might be, never again addressing the idea so directly; but this void in commentary has been partly filled by the critical work of Heaney's friend Rand Brandes, who has written about the poet's obsession with material mysticism, structural design and volume titles. Brandes has suggested that the poet circles back in each new volume not to relive the past but 'to forge, to hammer together, all of his work into a creative whole that includes the past, present and future': the poet, Brandes writes, wanted to create a 'sacred

<sup>27</sup> John Wilson Foster, 'Fraught Pleasures: Engaging Seamus Heaney', *The Irish Review* (1986—), No. 49 | 50, *Seamus Heaney* (Winter-Spring 2014 | 2015), pp. 122-136, p. 135.

<sup>28</sup> See '*The Soul Exceeds Its Circumstances*': *The Later Poetry of Seamus Heaney* edited by E. O'Brien (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2016); Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Crediting Marvels or Taking Responsibility', pp. 199-215, p. 215; Stephen Regan, "'Door into the Light'", pp. 261-276, pp. 275-6.

<sup>29</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in John Haffenden, 'Meeting Seamus Heaney: An Interview', *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), pp. 57-75 p. 64.

<sup>30</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in Frank Kinahan, 'Artists on Art: Interview with Seamus Heaney', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Spring, 1982), pp. 405-414, p. 410.

book—the book of books perpetually renewed and transformed with each new tome’.<sup>31</sup>

Brandes also stops short of confirming what the ‘sacred book’ was intended to look like or symbolise, and in the wake of Heaney’s death he did not broach the subject in his essay on *Human Chain*,<sup>32</sup> but reaffirms Heaney’s hints that he was working on a larger literary design which, I think, corresponds to stages of his own spiritual enlightenment.

The first phase of Heaney’s work began with *Death of a Naturalist*, in which the poet exercises a commensurate realism—palpable textures of earth as the living, incarnate present—in depicting rural life in his native County Derry. The volume demonstrates some evidence of metaphysical aspirations: ‘The Diviner’ expresses Heaney’s conceptualisation of poetry as divination of invisible energies; ‘St Francis and the Birds’ anticipates the airborne perspective central to ‘Sweeney Redivivus’ in *Station Island*. The last poem of the volume, ‘Personal Helicon’, combines ancient mythology and Jungian psychology to present a young poet committed to exploration of the hidden self: ‘I rhyme | To see myself, to set the darkness echoing’ (DN 57). The volume thus concludes with a gesture towards spiritual enquiry which carries over into *Door into the Dark*, a volume which conforms to the tradition of mystical contemplation of the ineffable. ‘The Forge’, the poem from which the volume takes its title, celebrates spiritual darkness; ‘The Peninsula’ aspires to visionary perception; ‘Night-Drive’ channels sexual energies with a more spiritual vision of renewal. The last poem of the volume, ‘Bogland’, seeks to disclose the spirit of place, though it also gestures to the Irish political dimension that would, intermittently, dominate Heaney’s writing. His third volume of poetry, *Wintering Out*, marks a definite shift influenced by the socio-political concerns

<sup>31</sup> Rand Brandes, ‘Seamus Heaney’s Working Titles: From “Advancements of Learning” to “The Midnight Anvil”’, *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, edited by B. O’Donoghue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 19-36, p. 34.

<sup>32</sup> See Rand Brandes, ‘The Poetics of Reverie and Revelation in the Last Poems’, *The Soul Exceeds Its Circumstances’: The Later Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, edited by E. O’Brien (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2016), pp. 329-47.

characteristic of the time, with a debate over the adequacy of rational humanism, in the face of political and atavistic forces driving more spiritual aspirations to the margins of the poetry. In the book, Heaney first employs the imagery from P.V. Glob's *The Bog People*, providing a political metaphor for the 'man-killing parishes' (WO 47-8) of Northern Ireland.

These first three books, as Heaney said, 'are the trace element of a hopeful learning experience, and all my anxiety was that I might be able to write poetry and do it well in the first place'; *North*, the fourth and final volume of the proposed first phase, was 'the first book' that Heaney considered 'to some extent designed'.<sup>33</sup> The volume includes several innovative expressions of Heaney's intensifying quest for mystical enlightenment. The title poem of the volume is a self-portrait in which he sets his sights on less immediate, more elusive transcendent concerns: Heaney denies the possibilities of visionary development, telling himself there will be 'no cascade of light' (N 19-20). But the poem is less about self-denial than it first appears; it is an expression of frustration with the limited scope of his poetry. The last poem of the volume, 'Exposure', also addresses this theme and emerges as perhaps the most important self-portrait in Heaney's triptych oeuvre: like 'North', it exudes frustration not only with the politics, but the self into which the poet had become: a writer too preoccupied with ethical considerations. As its enigmatic concluding symbol, the 'comet's pulsing rose' (N 73) reorients Heaney's work towards the transcendental as a vehicle of higher perspective. The poem that concludes the first third of Heaney's poetry should be read as a covert but nevertheless decisive statement of faith in a future spiritually-centred art.

The second phase of the oeuvre sees Heaney adopting four distinct approaches to the transcendent. It begins with *Field Work*, a volume that itself has an implicit tripartite structure in which the poet adopts a somewhat Romantic approach to the mystical. The opening image gives an indication of Heaney's aspirations: 'Oysters' takes cognizance of

<sup>33</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in Frank Kinahan, p. 410.

contingency and history, but it aspires to a spiritual realm of freedom ('Clear light') in which one enjoys a state of purity ('quickened into verb, pure verb', *FW* 11). As a statement of intent this poem is backed up by 'Casualty', which similarly looks towards a realm of enlightened being: 'Somewhere, well out, beyond...' (*FW* 24). The second section of the volume follows this direction of travel in 'Glanmore Sonnets', a sequence that opens under the influence of Wordsworth. The poet begins where he ended in *North*, a solitary protagonist in Glanmore assessing his place in the world, yet the mood is no longer anxious; Heaney is now self-controlled and as a result free to take in the 'deep no sound' and 'fundamental dark unblown rose' (*FW* 33), paving the way for tantalizing intimations of divinity beyond phenomena and a unification of the 'marvellous | and actual' (*FW* 39). The Glanmore sonnets overlap with a discernible third section of marriage poems, domestic and erotic images of Marie Heaney viewed as a source of transcendental experience. 'The Skunk' and 'The Otter' employ zoomorphic imagery to channel sexual excitement and longing for union, and the eponymous poem of the book offers a sacramental vision, wresting from the Catholic Church divine authority over the Heaneys' marriage and investing it in Nature, a view of the quotidian world as a spiritual cornucopia rooted in and inspired by marital love.

Yet Heaney obeys the command to radically change direction upon perfecting one mode of vision, with the subsequent volume, *Station Island*, breaking away from Romanticism and domestic harmonies in order to pursue strangeness and translation as offering a transcendent perspective. Informed by the myth of separation, enlightenment and return outlined by Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, this book is more self-evidently tripartite in structure. The first section—a series of meditations on defamiliarization—begins with the poet departing from his wife in 'The Underground' deliberately seeking solitude in his quest to find his own altered perspective on the world, an apprehension of pure reality. In the central sequence, 'Station Island', he conveys spiritual



thirst for absolution: subjecting his poetic self to the asceticism of the pilgrimage at Lough Derg, the ordeal is punctuated by translation from—and through—Dante and John of the Cross. Through Dante Heaney affirms the sexual instinct as a positive force for spiritual health, an effort at odds with the physical deprivation and self-denial symbolised by the island setting; based on a positive memory of a Carmelite monk at Confession, Heaney also displays his mystical credentials more explicitly than anywhere else in his writing by translating John of the Cross. Translation is central to the third section, ‘Sweeney Redivivus’, in which Heaney takes flight for an aerial view of Ireland and the sociopolitical entanglements which he appears to have left behind. But rather than a complacent, self-satisfied liberation from collective pieties, the sequence is shot through with the spiritual angst and desire which manifests in images of exposure and transfiguration such as those of ‘In the Beech’ and ‘Holly’. A ‘pristine sense of spiritual challenge’<sup>34</sup> sends the poet back underground at the end of the book, but this time to a cave in the Dordogne (*SI* 119-21), a new starting point for facing the emptiness to be countenanced, as he first outlined his Ellmann lectures, to make it regenerative as a mode of enlightenment.

Emptiness and ineffability are the constituent spiritual themes of *The Haw Lantern*. ‘Alphabets’, the opening poem of the volume, casts doubt over the value of language, a doubt symbolized by the disappearance of Anahorish school where the poet first learned his letters: ‘All gone’ (*HL* 3). But this poem also yearns for transcendental structure, as shown by the concluding reference to the Neoplatonic philosopher Marsilio Ficino who sought a vision of the whole and “not just single things” (*HL* 3). Aspirations for such a vision are reaffirmed by the concluding poem of the volume, ‘The Riddle’, which represents the process of art as a *via negativa* (*HL* 51), a way to God rooted in the negation of false visions. Throughout the

<sup>34</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in *Sources: Letters from Irish People on Sustenance for the Soul*, edited by Marie Heaney (Dublin: Townhouse, 1999), p. 160

volume Heaney repeatedly writes variations on this theme: ‘Hailstones’, a metaphysical vision infused by the sensual idealism of Thomas Traherne; ‘The Spoonbait’, a symbol of the soul’s *via negativa*; ‘The Disappearing Island’, the parable of hallucinatory spaces; and ‘The Shooting Script’, where the Irish language written in the sand disappears from view. ‘The Mud Vision’ spins a Neoplatonic rose window in an allegory of Ireland transmogrified as a union of two milieus, one of religious belief in the 1950s and one of secularization in the 1980s. An elegy for the poet’s father, ‘The Stone Verdict’, rejects language, but it also becomes, in the grander scheme of Heaney’s pantheon, a symbol of a higher court of spiritual appeal. Heaney’s sonnets for his mother, ‘Clearances’, pierces the ultimate reality of emptiness, the apprehension of which is intensified by the special realism that distinguishes moments of intimacy such as the famous potato-peeling scene or the night when Heaney and his mother *do* attend the chapel. Faithful to the cultural and religious details of the period which they represent, the poems are concluded with a counter-truth symbolized by an uprooted tree—echoed elsewhere for the effect of weightlessness in ‘The Wishing Tree’—which forms the basis of a personal meditation on how externalities are impermanent and how the self returns to the source of emptiness from whence it came (‘silence, beyond silence listened for’; ‘Clearances’, *HL* 32).

*Seeing Things* marks the climax of the second phase of Heaney’s work, concluding the search for transcendence in a blaze of revelatory daylight. The punning title fuses clear vision with hallucination, experience, seeing things in a way which the Buddhist tradition identifies as recognizing the true nature of things. Framed by translations of Dante and Virgil, the volume is divided into two sections. The first indicates a new degree of enlightenment. In ‘The Journey Back’, the shade of Philip Larkin describes himself in terms which apply to Heaney: ‘A nine-to-five man who had seen poetry’ (*ST* 7). Indeed, Heaney’s visionary aesthetic in the volume is decidedly rooted in the everyday: ‘Markings’ delineates his

primary themes of space, timelessness and flux, but it does so by focusing on the commonplace experiences of playing football, laying out the foundations of a house, and mowing grass. Similarly, ‘The Skylight’, which evokes a revelation of three-dimensional space, never leaves the routine world of Heaney’s study; ‘Wheels within Wheels’, which taps into the inherent, self-sustaining energies of reality, draws on memories of turning a bicycle wheel and going to the circus; ‘Fosterling’, a self-portrait which expresses the poet’s new dedication to the metaphysical, narrows his attention to ‘marvels’ like the ‘tree-clock of tin cans | The tinkers made’ (*ST* 50). The second half of the volume is a collection of extemporaneous poems divided into four subsections: ‘Lightenings’, ‘Settings’, ‘Crossings’ and ‘Squarings’. However much Heaney was inspired by Yeats at the time, the end-product starkly different in tone: across the four subsections, Heaney’s images of flux, space and timelessness reflect a much more serendipitous approach; to borrow Ellmann’s phrase, Heaney offers a less clamant philosophy than Yeats’s grand Olympian figures and fantastic visions.<sup>35</sup> ‘Everything flows’ (*ST* 85), Heaney avers in poem xxvii of ‘Crossings’, a declaration of faith in the ontological status of the Heraclitean doctrine of flux which places the writer among the mystics, though it does not remove him from, but in fact roots him in, ‘the heartland of the ordinary’ (*ST* 7).

In the third and final phase, Heaney ‘consciously and unconsciously circles back through his past’, hammering his work in unity.<sup>36</sup> As the quest to penetrate unknown territory is largely replaced by a circular movement whereby Heaney reviews and reconceives past worlds, these volumes—in a different way than the first four—‘grow together and go together’.<sup>37</sup> Now, the poet has a broadly consistent spiritual disposition: the enduring persona

<sup>35</sup> Richard Ellmann, ‘Heaney Agonistes’, *New York Times*, 14 March 1985  
 <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1985/03/14/heaney-agonistes>> [accessed September 2015]

<sup>36</sup> Rand Brandes, ‘Seamus Heaney’s Working Titles: From “Advancements of Learning” to “The Midnight Anvil”’, p. 34.

<sup>37</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in John Haffenden, p. 64.

of Heaney's poetry is 'that of someone not directly involved or in full touch with action in its immediacy, nor yet a mere observer', as John Wilson Foster has written.<sup>38</sup>

The first book of Heaney's third phase, *The Spirit Level*, returns to the political world but it is punctuated by imagery of foreknowledge and non-attachment which reflect this omniscient poetic persona in the late poems. In 'The First Words', Heaney reaffirms the doctrine of flux through a translation of Marin Sorescu: 'Let everything flow | Up to the four elements' (SL 38). Everything still flows as it did in *Seeing Things*, but Heaney is no longer divining the energies of the indissoluble whole; he is now interested in completing an autobiographical story of enlightenment which necessarily requires detachment and an abstract reflection about the books in the past and the future. 'Poet's Chair' combines motifs of circularity and foreknowledge, evoking the fourth dimension of time in a way that connotes detachment from the action of the poem itself. 'The Flight Path' records an encounter with a member of Sinn Fein whose call for solidarity a younger Heaney rejects in favour of the private self, a moment counterpointed later when the poet looks back on a scene of joy on the heights of the Christian site above Rocamadour. 'St Kevin and the Blackbird' is about self-forgetfulness and non-attachment to the ego, and 'At Banagher' likewise plays on the theme of mendicant rootlessness. Structurally, the volume is framed by images of the heart opening out to experience: 'To a Dutch Potter in Ireland' affirms the eternal human spirit ('Shining heart, heart as constant as a tide', SL 4), while the concluding poem of the volume, 'Postscript', confirms this transcendence of self with heart 'blown open' (SL 70) along the western coast of Ireland. Although these two poems capture the impulse towards transcendence, the volume as a whole has a distinct lack of the urge to escape that motivated the poet from *Field Work* to *Seeing Things*, and the philosophical implications of

<sup>38</sup> John Wilson Foster, 'Crediting Marvels: Heaney after 50', p. 215.

foreknowledge and non-attachment are revisited and addressed in each of Heaney's remaining volumes.

There are also further clues in *Electric Light* that suggest Heaney's sacred book continues to operate upon the poet's fundamentally detached perspective on the past and his anticipation for the closure of his project. The volume opens with the enlightened perception of flow and timelessness in 'At Toomebridge' and 'Perch', with the latter adopting a Hopkinsian voice to promulgate Heraclitean flux: 'The everything flows and steady go of the world' (EL 4). But Heaney is evidently no longer moved by pristine spiritual challenge but instead a philosophical inclination to review and revise his metaphysics as well as settling other scores such as the criteria for poetic themes, challenging Yeats, for instance, on the subject of 'passive suffering' ('On His Work in the English Tongue', EL 62). This contemplative tenor of the volume is also reflected by the movement of 'Desfina', a sonnet which recalls traveling from Mount Parnassus in the car: 'Siren-tyred and manic on the horn | Round hairpin bends like boustrophedon' (EL 43), a reference to the ancient style of writing that turns on each line which recapitulates the foreknowledge of poetry as a ploughshare in 'Poet's Chair'. In 'The Fragment', Heaney plays on the related motif of a beginningless and endless cosmology which extends backwards and forwards in time, implying that the poet is no longer advancing in a linear direction and chasing the transcendental absolute. In 'Vitruviana', Heaney further conveys this reflective action in conjuring the relationship between matter and spirit in imagery of St Francis of Assisi, and he revises the distrust of phenomena expressed by 'In Illo Tempore' in *Station Island*, drawing upon the Buddhism of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and the Aristotelian metaphysics of Joyce's *Ulysses* in offering a positive view of the physical world that did not appeal to him at that earlier moment. As the second volume in this third phase, *Electric Light* effects a continuation of the poet's enlightened persona rather than mark a distinct change of direction.

The formal circuitousness in Heaney's narrative of enlightenment in this third phase increases in *District and Circle*, a volume in which the poet faces up to the reality of death but also continues to develop his motifs of foreknowledge and non-attachment. Heaney, in an offhand phrase that reflects his more relaxed attitude towards matters spiritual, now sees the world and his art as 'heaven enough | To be going on with' (DC 10). The world of this volume is one of relentless brutality and decay, suggesting that the poet no longer feels compelled to outstrip the given circumstance of historical and material reality: 'The Turnip Snedder' conveys the ruthless cycle of death to which most of us avert our attention, and 'A Shiver' captures the human impulse towards domination and power, reflecting the poet's own enlightened recognition of this impulse in himself. 'On the Spot' dwells on the mortification of flesh, while 'The Lift', an elegy for the poet's aunt Mary, sees death reflected in every dimension of life. Underpinning all of this is Heaney's continued preoccupation with the metaphysics of foreknowledge and non-attachment. 'Rilke: *The Apple Orchard*' moves from a sunset scene of foreknowledge of deepening shades among the trees ('stored within ourselves a something which | From feeling and from feeling recollected') towards the self-reflexive contemplation of 'when a long life willingly | Cleaves to what's willed and grows in mute resolve' (DC 68). 'The Midnight Anvil' directly alludes to 'The Forge' in *Door into the Dark*, and 'The Blackbird of Glanmore' has an explicit links to 'Mid Term Break' in *Death of a Naturalist*. 'The Blackbird of Glanmore', in which the central experience the transcendence of self in non-attachment, offers an enlightened expression of the volume's final recognition of the elusive but inescapable presence of death in life, and when Heaney describes himself as having 'a bird's eye view of myself', he indirectly comments on his overall creative structure: he is also watching himself circle back to his original point of departure.

The third phase and the oeuvre as a whole is completed by *Human Chain*, a volume in which we witness, as Heaney said of Yeats's 'Cuchulain Comforted', 'a rite of passage from life into death, but a rite whose meaning is subsumed into song, into the otherness of art' (*P* 113). The primary mythical source for the volume is Virgil's *Aeneid* ('Route 110', 'The Riverbank'), which reflects Heaney's enlightened awareness of his mortality: although the book opens with physical alertness ('Had I not been awake') and has later images with a sense of potential revelation ('In the Attic'), with intermittent impulses towards a utopian spirit world and contemplation of an afterlife ('A Herbal', 'Loughanure'), Heaney further exhibits a detachment from himself which allows him to contextualise his death. This sense of perspective is partly informed by the poet's minor stroke in 2006 which is recorded in 'Miracle', an homage to the men who carried him in his immobilised state from his bed in Donegal, and in 'Chanson d'Aventure', which conjures, with its references to Donne's 'The Ecstasy', the feeling of being a soul trapped inside the failing body. In 'The Baler', death becomes a source of enlightened perception through providing a context that makes the beauty of life seem almost unbearably poignant. 'The Door was Open and the House was Dark' moves towards 'a not unwelcoming | Emptiness' (*HC* 81). But the metaphysics of foreknowledge and the theology of non-attachment also continue to structure Heaney's thought. 'Wraiths' evokes intimations of the foreknown, while 'Hermit Songs' making a major philosophical statement on art through the theological tenets of self-transcendence. In addition, an attendant motif is the 'indelible' injunction of Matthew 6:33 which he encountered on his first day at St Columb's: '*Seek ye first the Kingdom...*' (*HC* 5). Heaney's twelve volumes do nothing if not indicate their author's responsiveness to this command; the last of them returns us to the place where his metaphysical quest began, completing the cycle and inviting us to search for enlightenment from our own point of departure.

This, then, is the broad context in which I want to examine Heaney's aesthetics of enlightenment. The first books of volumes are characterised by self-exploration within the historical contingencies and collective unconscious of Northern Ireland, culminating in an existential crisis and moment of spiritual refocusing in 'Exposure' in *North*. The second phase comprises an active search for transcendence through various aesthetic modes, culminating in the enlightened perception of *Seeing Things*. The third phase sees Heaney revisit the world as a visionary public poet, his spiritual gaze increasingly reflective and contemplative. In its final shape the oeuvre manifests the poet's sense of his individual life as circular, and in so doing he rehearses in his art, as Dante did before him, the soul's unity of being.<sup>39</sup> 'By telling *his* fable, *his* truth', to apply borrow Heaney's comments on his friend Brian Friel, 'he has given his audience access to their own possibilities and reminded them of their limitations'.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> John Wilson Foster, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 57.

<sup>40</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'For Liberation: Brian Friel and the Use of Memory', *The Achievement of Brian Friel*, edited by A. Peacock (Ulster Editions and Monographs; Rowan & Littlefield, 1993), pp. 229-240, p. 240.



## 2. A Spiritual Intellect: Heaney's Conceptualisation of Enlightenment

### 2.1. Proper Work in an Agnostic Time, 1963-1975

In 1963, 'Seamus J. Heaney' contributed an article entitled 'Our Own Dour Way' to *Hibernia*. It surveys the current state of literary journals available in Northern Ireland at that time, but is punctuated by glimmers of its author's future interest in the subject of human enlightenment: 'The artist is the custodian of human values of sanity and tolerance and these are the qualities most needed in the North today'.<sup>1</sup> When, in 1964, Heaney republished the essay as an editorial in *Trench*, this conception of the enlightened role of the poet within the community is given a theological inflection by a text-box containing abbreviated quotations from *Lagan: A Collection of Ulster Writings*: "'No writer, however talented, should uproot himself in spirit from his native place', it states, and 'the central problem is to interpret the complex spiritual life of the province'".<sup>2</sup> Heaney was politically concerned with 'the rights of man',<sup>3</sup> but the scope of 'human values' arguably extends beyond the civic boundaries of 'sanity and tolerance': from the outset Heaney was demonstrably interested in the 'spiritual life' of his community. Two years later, Heaney published his first book of poems, *Death of a Naturalist*, which evoked spiritual imagery such as the perception of invisible forces ('The Diviner'), a saint's love of creation ('St Francis and the Birds'), and the obscurities of psychological and spiritual darkness ('Personal Helicon').

By 1968, there were glimmers of Heaney's burgeoning conceptualisation of enlightenment as a process of sustained intellectual and spiritual effort. In 'Canticles of the Earth', a review of Theodore Roethke's *Collected Poems*, he writes: 'For although at least

<sup>1</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'Our Own Dour Way', *Hibernia*, 1963. p.15. rep. *Trench*, St. Joseph's Teacher Training College, Belfast, April 1964, pp. 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> John Boyd, 'Introduction', *Lagan: A Collection of Ulster Writings* (Belfast: Lagan Publications, 1943), pp.5-7, p.7., quoted in Seamus Heaney, 'Our Own Dour Way', *Trench*, St. Joseph's Teacher Training College, Belfast, April 1964, pp. 3-4 [Copy held in John Hewitt Special Collection, Ulster University, Coleraine].

<sup>3</sup> See Seamus Heaney, 'Old Derry's Walls', *The Listener*, 24 October 1968, p. 521.

one spirit of the age will probably be discernible in a poet's work, he should not turn his brain into a butterfly net in pursuit of it' (P 190). In Roethke Heaney senses moral integrity and a spiritual ambition which aspires to 'a sense of unity with cosmic energies': Roethke deals with 'the possibility of order, harmony and illumination', he argues, and exhibits 'a constant natural urge to praise, to maintain or recapture ecstasy'. In this context, his strongest poems 'exhale something of a Franciscan love of every living thing', invoking the notion of 'divine unity working through them'; Roethke is therefore capable of 'a civil note of benediction, and can give the impression that the lines came ripe and easy as windfalls' (P 193). 'St Francis and the Birds', in *Death of a Naturalist*, shows this praise for Roethke is aspirational, not self-identification: at that time, Heaney was exploring and expanding upon the darkness initiated by 'Personal Helicon' and centralised by *Door into the Dark*, due out the next year in 1969. Remarkably, though, his terms anticipate much that, at this point, lay in the distant future: the sacramental vision of *Seeing Things*, the bass note of benediction throughout *The Spirit Level*, and the final spiritual windfall of *Human Chain* ('A Kite for Aibhín'). Indeed, earlier in his Roethke review he provides, unwittingly, an apt description of the development of his work from *Field Work* to *Seeing Things*. Of Roethke's 'Cuttings', Heaney says:

Out of Eden man takes his way, and beyond the garden life is riotous; chaos replaces correspondence, consciousness thwarts communion, the light of the world fades in the shadow of death. Until the final serenity and acceptance of all things in a dance of flux, which comes in the posthumous *The Far Field*, Roethke's work is driven into two opposite directions by his fall into manhood. (P 192)

Heaney's own work would be similarly driven in two opposite directions—contemplation of 'a motionless point' and 'the command to participate | actively in history' ('Away from it

All'; *SI* 16-17)—until the serenity and acceptance of all things in flux that is indicated by *Seeing Things*.

At the beginning of 1974, the search for enlightenment is clearly rising more forcibly to the apex of Heaney's aesthetic philosophy. In 'Faith, Hope and Poetry', a review of Osip Mandelstam's *Selected Poems* and Clarence Brown's biography of the Russian poet, Heaney argues that the ideological assent to the doctrine of art for art's sake had been unwisely degraded by 'philistines': 'Art has a religious, a binding force for the artist', Heaney contested. The religious sense of poetry creates, in his view, a siege mentality whereby the writer feels destined to 'go his own way and do his proper work in an agnostic time', bringing that 'faith to the point of arrogance and triumphalism' (*P* 217). Heaney's somewhat paranoid sense of the spiritual dimension of life as being under attack, as well as the idea that poetry is in danger of being overshadowed by politics (*P* 219), underpins his early approach to enlightenment: Mandelstam figures prominently in 'Exposure', a poem, set in 1973, about an artist's derailment from his vocation by worldly concerns. The review, then, derives its intellectual conviction from the trajectory Heaney was already angling to follow in his own work.

When, in October 1974, Heaney wrote 'Feelings into Words', he extended this conviction by contextualizing his work within the historical circumstances of the Troubles which flared into life in 1969. The riots in Belfast that year, he famously reflected, marked the moment poetry moved 'from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament' (*P* 56). Characteristically, he frames the political violence as essentially religious, using an idiom 'remote from the agnostic world': the indigenous numen of the Catholic psyche competing against Protestant imperial power. He found his most celebrated set of symbols in P. V. Glob's *The Bog People*, a chief influence over *Wintering Out* and the first part of *North* that

conveys this mythic ethnography. The lecture concludes with a statement on the urgent need to ‘define and interpret the present by bringing it into significant relationship with the past’ (P 60). In this, Heaney signals that his earlier work of forging a poem out of the dark embryo must give way to the ‘daunting pressures and responsibilities’ of forging a deliberately constructed mythology rooted in the national consciousness. Heaney’s self-portrait as a writer more inclined to a passive receipt of material—characterised in the introduction under broad categories of ‘divination’, ‘revelation of the self to the self’, ‘restoration of the culture to itself’, and poems as ‘elements of continuity, with the aura of archaeological finds’—is certainly accurate. But some of what he cites as examples of earlier work are described in terms more suited to his later visionary images. For example, his abstract discussion of technique seems speculative rather than derived from experience: for the poet, he argues, technique involves ‘a definition of his stance towards life, a definition of his own reality’ and becomes ‘the whole creative effort of the mind’s and body’s resources to bring the meaning of experience within the jurisdiction of form’ (P 47). These comments speak of an aspiration which is also evident in his description of ‘The Diviner’ as ‘a small *perpetuum mobile* in language itself’ (P 48). Heaney’s political comments and poetry in *Wintering Out* and *North* were always inflected by the language and ambitions of mysticism: a sense confirmed by *Field Work*, in which Heaney explores what he called Wordsworth’s ‘survival in his own sensibility of a magical way of responding to the natural world, of reading phenomena as signs, occurrences requiring divination’ (P 50-51). The ‘pointblank tea time bullet’ (FW 19) of ‘A Postcard from North Antrim’ is counterbalanced by ritualistic cleansing; and in ‘Glanmore Sonnets’, Heaney responds, like Wordsworth, to intimations of transcendent forces, ‘mysteries’ and ‘mountings’ from the hiding places (FW 43).

By December 1974, Heaney’s expectation that the quest for enlightenment would eventually command a reservoir of intellectual willpower is evident in the structural emphasis

of 'The Fire I' the Flint', a lecture which celebrates Gerard Manley Hopkins's intentional approach to the divine. As the Shakespearean title indicates, Heaney contrasts the passive receipt of images and conscious strain towards mastery. The former is poetry which 'is as a gum which oozes | From whence 'tis nourished', while the latter is that in which 'the fire i' the flint | Shows not till it be struck'. While his own poetry at this juncture could be described as belonging to the 'realm of marshlight' (P 84), Heaney's primary interest is in Hopkins's mature mastery rooted in the flint-spark of intellect. Whereas Heaney, like Keats, woos the reader to receive, Hopkins 'alerts us to perceive' (P 85). Heaney quotes Hopkins's famous letter to Coventry Patmore in which the priest-poet laments Keats's early tendency to abandon himself to a life of impressions rather than thoughts and praises his emerging interest in 'higher things, and of powerful active thought' (P 86). Heaney rightly detects a self-portrait in this assessment, pointing to Hopkins's own youth when he was under the spell of Walter Pater at Oxford, but there is also a personal interest for Heaney himself: the relationship between poetic creation and divinity. Throughout the remainder of the lecture he pores over Hopkins's masculine mode of 'assertion or command', 'control of the materials', and 'labour of shaping'. On this matter Heaney quotes Ted Hughes's commentary in *A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse*: 'How things are between man and his idea of the Divinity determines everything in his life' (P 91).<sup>4</sup> Hopkins's composition, Heaney argues, was in constant negotiation with his idea of the Creator, bringing into congruence his understanding of the Christian mystery and poetic mystery (P 91). While his mature work contained the incubatory unconscious, Heaney reasons, it is not just 'natural volition and personal appeasement'; it had to be 'in compliance with and an enactment of the will of God' (P 95). Hopkins's 'idea of the Creator himself as father and fondler is central to the mastering, design-making rhetoric and fondling of detail in his work' (P 96). Hopkins's work, Heaney

<sup>4</sup> Ted Hughes, 'Note', *A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), pp. 184-185.

concludes begins with the ‘masculine spur of flame’ (P 94). ‘Heaven-Haven’, one of the examples of masculine mastery cited by Heaney, will inform the imagery of the quickened perceptions in the seventh Glanmore Sonnet. Hopkins also emerges much later still to inform ‘Perch’ in *Electric Light*, by which time had incorporated the metaphysics of Herclitean flux into the fabric of his own aesthetics.

At the beginning of 1975, Heaney turned his attention to Patrick Kavanagh in ‘From Monaghan to the Grand Canal’, another instance in which intellectual control is regarded as one of the essential criteria for enlightenment. It is perhaps one of the most repeated comments about Heaney that Kavanagh inspired in him a confidence about the validity of his own country roots as subject matter for poetry. But he was also interested in Kavanagh’s ‘messages of transcendence’. To Heaney’s disappointment, these are only credible in certain instances. An ‘inelegant opportunism’, Heaney argues, overrides Kavanagh’s capacity for ‘Franciscan acceptance’ and ‘the condition of charity’ (P 129). Kavanagh’s strengths of purity, authority and authenticity of voice do not outweigh the lack of ‘any plotted cumulative force of the opus as a whole’; the man who suffered is ‘not fully recompensed by the man who created’ (P 129). Heaney’s concluding assessment is clear-cut: ‘Without myth, without masters, “No system, no Plan”, he lived from hand to mouth and unceremoniously where Yeats—and Sidney—fed deliberately and ritually, in the heart’s rag-and-bone shop’ (P 129-30). As these comments suggest, Heaney aimed to develop a structure in which to contextualise his search for enlightenment. A decade later, Heaney would favourably reassess Kavanagh’s transcendental poetry, but this does not so much undermine this first line of argument as further contribute to the view that Heaney, like Yeats (whom Kavanagh dismissed), could recognise spiritual changes in himself and place them within his own need for and appreciation of a developed aesthetic system. Later, on 20 June 1975, Heaney praised Louis MacNeice in this regard as a ‘frustrated romantic, deprived of belief in beliefs,

rejoicing by constructing something upon which to rejoice'.<sup>5</sup> And in an interview published by *The Irish Times* in December of that year, he reiterated what he had intimated in his Hopkins lecture a year earlier: as 'you get older, the ooze and nurture can't be relied on for everything, the intellect and self-knowledge have to begin to enter the business, especially if you believe poetry is the means by which you walk the tightrope to extinction'.<sup>6</sup> By this Heaney seems to mean that being a poet is his intellectual and spiritual vocation, as his prose and interviews confirm over the subsequent years.

## **2.2. The Idea of Transcendence, 1977-1986**

The intellectual effort involved in clarifying and establishing a transcendent perspective begins to dominate Heaney's comments and prose after the publication of *North* in 1975. In a revealing interview with Monie Begley in 1977, he reflects on the concluding scene of 'Exposure':

The book ends up in Wicklow in December '73. It's in some ways the book all books were leading to. You end up with nothing but your vocation, with words and your own free choice [...] I'm not interested in my poetry canvassing public events deliberately any more. I would like to write poems of myself at this age. Poems, so far, have been fueled by a world that is gone or a world that is too much with us, public events. Just through accident [...] I've ended up with myself, and I have to start there, you know.<sup>7</sup>

Implicit in this account of his work is that he has moved from accident to purposeful effort,

<sup>5</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'MacNeice's Dark Tower', *The Guardian*, 20 June 1975, p. 195.

<sup>6</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in 'The Saturday Interview: Caroline Walsh Talks to Seamus Heaney', *Irish Times*, 6 December 1975, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in 'The North: Silent Awareness', Monie Begley, *Rambles in Ireland* (Old Greenwich: Devin-Adair Co, 1977), pp. 159-170, p. 169.

the effort being to move away from ‘public events’ and explore the more private sources of inspiration that transcend such matters. This interview marks the beginning of the second phase of Heaney’s oeuvre. Also in 1977, he told Seamus Deane the poet needs ‘an ordering structure for his own psychic materials and energies’. Yeats and Kavanagh exemplify, for Heaney, these opposing demands: Yeats demonstrates the need for a structure and a sustaining landscape of myth; Kavanagh represents ‘the need to be liberated and distanced from it, the need to be open, unpredictably susceptible, lyrically opportunistic’.<sup>8</sup> Given that the lyric impulse is instinctive, it can look after itself; the ordering structure needs deliberate effort, as Heaney’s final comment in the interview makes clear: ‘you have to make your own work your home. If you live as an author your reward is authority. But of course the trouble is how to be sure you are living properly’ (ibid., 70).

Determination to establish a metaphysical framework in which to develop a poetic approach to the transcendent is also the motivating factor of ‘The Sense of Place’, a Romantic vision of Irish topography as an inexhaustible source of self-definition and spiritual union with divinity much like that which would manifest in *Field Work*. Drawing on the intense evocation of place in Kavanagh, John Montague, and John Hewitt, Heaney appeals to ‘a sense of tradition’ in which the landscape can be read as a manuscript, ‘sacramental, instinct with signs, implying a system of reality beyond visible realities’ (P 132). Heaney claims his childhood provided him with a foundation ‘for a marvellous or a magical view of the world, a foundation that sustained a diminished structure of lore and superstition and half-pagan, half-Christian thought and practice’ (P 133). Here his tradition-making schemata echoes his earlier view of Wordsworth’s magical way of looking at the world. He also echoes his conviction of art as having a theological function, arguing that the flora of his rural

<sup>8</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in “‘Unhappy and at Home’: Seamus Deane interviews Seamus Heaney”, in *The Crane Bag*, 1, 1 (1977), pp. 66-73, p. 69



landscapes had ‘a religious force, especially if we think of the root of the world *religare*, to bind fast’ (ibid). Heaney locates an historical precedent in the Irish Literary Revival, which he praises for its efforts to establish a spiritual vision in a time when ‘the spirit of the age was becoming increasingly scientific and secular, when Sir James Frazer’s *Golden Bough* was seeking to banish the mystery from the old faiths’ (P 135). It is hard to miss the implication that the intellectual milieu of the late 1970s is similarly secular, anti-mystery and anti-faith. Heaney celebrates Yeats’s counter-cultural movement to ‘reinststate fairies, to make the world more magical than materialistic, and to elude the social and political interpretations of society in favour of a legendary and literary vision of race’ (P 135). Yeats’s sense of the otherness of Sligo bolsters Heaney’s own determination to explore his impulse towards ‘apprehension of the spirit of a place’ (P 136) in which his oeuvre would be rooted. Heaney also implicitly distinguishes himself from his contemporaries Derek Mahon, Michael Longley and Paul Muldoon whose ‘metaphysical’ sense of place symbolises a personal drama before it epitomises ‘a communal situation’. None of these poets ‘surrenders himself to the mythology of his place’ (P 148), but rather imposes his personal mythology upon familiar places and in familiar language.

Christianity and Irish paganism would continue to feed Heaney’s contemplation of the theme of enlightenment through 1978. In an RTÉ programme entitled ‘The God in the Tree’, he explores inherited Irish literary and religious ideas of the transcendental, identifying in early Irish nature poetry two elements: the *pagus*, the pagan wilderness, green, full-throated, unrestrained; and Christian *disciplina*, the sense of spiritual principle and religious calling that transcends nature. Heaney registers his preference for the idea that the poet is connected to the mysteries of a darker, greener pagan world than early Christian Ireland: ‘Oisín rather than Patrick’, as he put it. But the identification is complicated by a closing self-portrait of a visit to Gallarus Oratory in Kerry eleven years earlier. Inside the oratory Heaney felt the

weight of Christianity in ‘all its rebuking aspects, its calls to self-denial and self-abnegation, its humbling of the proud flesh and insolent spirit’:

But coming out of the cold heart of the stone, into the sunlight and the dazzle of grass and sea, I felt a lift in my heart, a surge towards happiness that must have been experienced over and over again by those monks as they crossed that same threshold centuries ago. This surge towards praise, this sudden apprehension of the world as light, as illumination, this is what remains central to our nature poetry and makes a unique inheritance (*P* 189)

Readers of Heaney’s earlier poetry would recognise this synthesis of Christian ascetism and pagan apprehension of natural beauty in ‘At Gallarus Oratory’ (*DD* 22). Also in 1978, he wrote ‘The Poet as a Christian’ for *The Furrow*, a journal for the Catholic Church. He pirates much anecdotal material from ‘The Sense of Place’, but adds a new qualification: ‘I am convinced that our sense of transcendental realities played an active part in the way we sensed our place’. This sense of transcendental structures precedes the immanent world of nature; it inspires the pursuit of ‘psychic health, a self-possession, an adjustment between inner and outer realities, a religious commitment to the ever-evolving disciplines of the art which the poet has to credit as his form of sanctity’.<sup>9</sup> Nowhere does the poet put his essentially religious vision of the writer’s vocation more clearly, although Heaney’s more sceptical side is glimpsed in his recognition that this may be an ‘unfinishable journey towards wholeness’ (*ibid*).

Yet, throughout 1978, Heaney was repeatedly moved to espouse principles of artistic labour towards this end, which suggests that he was not discouraged in his pursuit of spiritual illumination in a transcendent dimension delineated by aesthetics. In ‘The Makings of a

<sup>9</sup> Seamus Heaney, ‘The Poet as Christian’, *The Furrow*, Vol. 64, No. 10 October 1978, pp. 541-45, p. 542.

Music', another survey of the incubatory and masterly poetic, Heaney appears increasingly attracted to Yeats when he concludes with a reference to the latter's 'Long-legged Fly' as 'a transcendent realisation' of the elusive relationship between 'the creative moment in the life of an individual and the effect of that moment's conception through history' (P 77). It is the kind of abstract Yeatsian question which will resurface (with a touch of self-effacement and humour) in *Seeing Things*. But at this juncture, the earnest attraction to self-exploration within cosmic contexts is supported by 'Yeats as an Example?', in which Heaney praises Yeats's 'solitude, the will towards excellence, the courage, the self-conscious turning away from that in which he no longer believed, which is Dublin life, and turning towards that which he trusts, which is an image or a dream' (P 109). Yeats's work, Heaney argued, 'not only explicitly proclaims the reality of the poetic vocation but convinces by the deep note of certitude registered in the proclamation itself' (P 110). This certitude extends to death, which is transcended in Yeats's oeuvre as a rite of passage 'whose meaning is subsumed into the otherness of art' (P 113). By 1979, Heaney agreed in an interview that he was contemplating such a Yeatsian 'making of the soul': 'that area of thinking', he said, was something which he had begun to afford serious attention.<sup>10</sup> The following year, he collected his early prose as *Preoccupations*, taking an epitaph from Yeats's *Explorations* which warned that 'the following of art is little different from the following of religion in the intense occupation it demands' (P 7). The journey towards wholeness may be 'unfinishable', but Heaney was evidently motivated to penetrate and occupy the realm of enlightenment, what he called Yeats's 'bullet-proof glass of the spirit' (P 99).

In 1982, the 'sudden apprehension of the world as light, as illumination' reemerges in Heaney's attempt to recast Philip Larkin as a closet symbolist in the commissioned essay,

<sup>10</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in John Haffenden, p. 60.

‘The Main of Light’.<sup>11</sup> Heaney’s theoretical framework is derived from Shakespeare’s sixtieth sonnet, a poem he describes as ‘an unpredictable strike into the realm of pure being’ (GT 15). Heaney argues that Larkin’s first appeal may be to our predicament as creatures born to die, but ‘there survives in him a repining for a more crystalline reality to which he might give allegiance’ (which makes him sound like an English John of the Cross) (GT 16). Larkin’s shift from Yeats to ‘an anti-Romantic, morally sensitive attitude’ embodied by Thomas Hardy does not mean, Heaney writes, eradication of an appetite for the ‘sensation of revelation’ and ‘a realm beyond the social and historical’ (GT 19). As evidence, Heaney quotes, among other poems, Larkin’s ‘Here’, where the speaker is drawn to ‘unfenced existence | Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach’.<sup>12</sup> Heaney uses Joycean terms to argue that the image constitutes an epiphany, a release from the ‘scrupulous meanness’ of the ‘disillusioned intelligence’ (GT 19). Larkin’s symbolism of light can therefore be read ‘without embarrassment to the sceptical man’ (GT 20). Heaney further emphasises the light of Larkin’s ‘Water’, which begins with the statement that if he were called to ‘construct a religion’ he would ‘make use of water’, and concludes with a raised glass of water where ‘any-angled light | Would congregate endlessly’.<sup>13</sup> For Heaney, this is a ‘natural monstrance’ held above the socially defensive idiom (GT 19). But a Yeatsian emphasis is placed upon Larkin’s ‘High Windows’, where the poet thinks of ‘sun-comprehending glass’: ‘And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows | Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless’.<sup>14</sup> This ‘brightness of belief in liberation and amelioration’, Heaney writes, ‘falls from the air which immediately fills with a different, infinitely neutral splendour’ (GT 21). Here Heaney is drawing upon the

<sup>11</sup> Seamus Heaney, ‘The Main of Light’, *Larkin at Sixty* edited by Anthony Twaite (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), pp. 131-8.

<sup>12</sup> Philip Larkin, ‘Here’, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 136.

<sup>13</sup> Philip Larkin, ‘Water’, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 93.

<sup>14</sup> Philip Larkin, ‘High Windows’, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 165.

terms of Thomas Nashe's 'A Litany in Time' ('Brightness falls from the air') which Yeats exalted in 'The Symbolism of Poetry': 'We may call this metaphorical writing, but it is better to call it symbolical writing', Yeats writes, 'because metaphors are not profound enough to be moving, when they are not symbols'.<sup>15</sup> Yeats thus refutes being lost in 'externalities of all kinds' and approves of writers who 'dwell upon the element of evocation, of suggestion, upon what we call the symbolism in great writers' (ibid., 240-241). In rejecting the parts of Larkin's work 'encumbered in naturalistic data' (GT 19)—an analogue of Yeats's 'externalities'—Heaney implicitly distances himself from the other side of his own aesthetic agenda, which has more in common with what Arthur Symons called the attempt "'to build in brick and mortar inside the covers of a book'".<sup>16</sup> While he attempts to find common ground with Larkin within the symbolist tradition, Heaney's time as Professor of Poetry at Oxford would see him take a very different position on his English contemporary in an exploration of what constitutes an enlightened perception of death.

Yeatsian symbolism continued to inform Heaney's epistemology in 1983, which is when his lecture 'Among Schoolchildren', a major statement of his aspirations based upon the final stanza of the poem from which he took his title:

Labour is blossoming or dancing where  
 The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,  
 Nor beauty born out of its own despair,  
 Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.  
 O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,  
 Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?  
 O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,  
 How can we know the dancer from the dance?<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> W.B. Yeats, 'The Symbolism of Poetry', *Ideas of Good and Evil* (London: A.H. Bullen, 1903), p. 242.

<sup>16</sup> Arthur Symons, 'Introduction', *The Symbolist Tradition in Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1899), p. 7, quoted in W.B. Yeats, 'The Symbolism of Poetry', *Ideas of Good and Evil* (London: A.H. Bullen, 1903), p. 240.

<sup>17</sup> W.B. Yeats, 'Among School Children', *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1955), pp. 242-245, p. 244-245.

This image, Heaney avers, is ‘guarantee of our human capacity to outstrip the routine world, the borders of ideology and the conditionings of history’ (AS 16). Contrasting it with the nativist vision of Sean O Riordan’s ‘Come Back Again’, Heaney claims this poem is a vision of ‘a naturalness and effortless richness of being, a vision, in fact, of the paradisal place, but an ampler vision than O Riordan’s, where the earthly conflicts between flesh and spirit, beauty, truth, effort and ease, will and temperament, are all elided and assumed into harmony and unity’. From this poem Heaney derives the terms of his main theological—and indeed pedagogical—ambition, which is towards a form of enlightenment:

And what it suggests is the necessity of an idea of transcendence, an impatience with systems, a yearning to be completely fulfilled at all levels of our being, to strike beyond the ordinary daily levels of achievement where one goal is won at the expense of another, to arrive at a final place which is not the absence of activity but, on the contrary, the continuous realisation of all the activities of which we are capable.

It is this mode of thinking which we should cultivate in ourselves and try to awaken in our pupils: munificent, non-sectarian, energetic and delightful. This is poetry escaping from the actual into the imagined, from external circumstance to internal penetration, from outer to inner space. The mode is the mode of dream and revelation. It does not refer for its validation to the routine facts and events of daily life but to the inner possibilities dormant in our nature. It alerts faculties that doze inertly as we go about our usual business, stirs capacities that are too seldom exercised. The walls of the world expand, the scope of our possibilities opens and widens for the duration of the stanza. We go beyond our normal cognitive bounds and sense a new element where we are not alien but liberated, more alive to ourselves, more drawn out, educated. (AS 16)

‘For the duration of the stanza’: latent in this phrase is Heaney’s realism, the sense that this transcendent realisation may only be available in the world of aesthetics. As a reader he is convinced by visionary realms, as a writer he is still evidently motivated by aspirations to secure a place in his own transcendent dimension, but his ‘impatience with systems’ is slightly misleading, since *Station Island*—which was to be published the following year—operates upon a systematic framework. Yeats’s poem is also one progenitor of ‘In the Beech’, a poem in ‘Sweeney Redivivus’, the series of glosses on Heaney’s translation *Sweeney Astray* which provided him with a mythical framework in which to explore this idea of a distinctly literary transcendence. ‘Insofar as Sweeney is a figure of the artist, displaced, guilty, assuaging himself by his utterance’, Heaney wrote in his introduction to the translation, ‘it possible to read the work as an aspect of the quarrel between free creative imagination and the constraints of religious, political and domestic obligation’.<sup>18</sup> The association between religion and ‘constraints’ here should not go unnoticed, especially by those who would seek to portray Heaney’s quest for enlightenment as an essentially Catholic affair. Heaney’s understanding of liberation in *Station Island* is just as clearly informed by James Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, a systematic Jungian analysis of enlightenment across various traditions.

The aspiration to inhabit and speak from a transcendent perspective lies at the core of Heaney’s statements on the spiritual work of the writer in 1985. He contributed to the Spring issue of the *Irish University Review* an essay entitled “‘Envies and Identifications’: Dante and the Modern Poet’, a four-part contemplation of religious and visionary modes of art wrought in engagement with the legacy of the Italian master. The first section includes the qualification that when poets turn to exemplary figures of the past ‘they turn to an image of their own creation, one which is likely to be a reflection of their own imaginative needs, their

<sup>18</sup> Seamus Heaney, ‘Introduction’, *Sweeney Astray* (Derry: Field Day, 1983), pp. viii-ix.

own artistic inclinations and procedures' (*EI* 5). Those to whom Heaney turns in this essay can therefore be read as reflections of his own needs at this time. The first image is Yeats's 'Ego Dominus Tuus', which Heaney contextualises as a manifestation of that poet's intensifying need to 'set out in his verse certain laws which he assumed to be operative in the psychology of the artist and of human beings generally' (*ibid*). In Heaney's terms, these laws denoted that energy was discharged and reality was revealed and enforced when the artist strives to obtain the mask of his opposite: 'in the act of summoning that image, he does his proper work and leaves us with the art itself, which is a kind of trace element of the inner struggle of opposites, a graph of the effort of transcendence' (*ibid*). Geoffrey Hill's 'religious angst' is 'condensed' into the Dantean image of 'Florentines', and Wilfred Owen's 'Strange Encounter' is cited briefly as a similar instance. Thomas Kinsella's oeuvre, however, has direct pertinence to Heaney's practice. 'There is a whole study to be written', Heaney argues, 'about the way Kinsella's exploration of the individual's quest for coherence and integrity in a world of constant disintegration and slippage has been informed by the deep stream of Dantean example flowing at the back of his mind' (*EI* 6). This quest for unification is discernible in the main body of the essay, which is devoted to T.S. Eliot and Osip Mandelstam.

Eliot's ultimate concerns with Dante, Heaney argues, 'were less with the strictly verbal and technical aspects of poetry, more with the philosophical and religious significances which could be drawn from and relied upon within a work of poetic art'. Eliot was in the business of 'composing his soul', as evidenced by the second section of 'Little Gidding' which 'escapes the local trappings of the historical moment and is suspended in the ether of the contemplative mind'; it conducts the reader, Heaney writes, away from what is 'contingent' and is not mimetic of the world but of the 'calescent imagination':

All this, of course, reinforces one of our perennial expectations from art, that it deliver



what Sir Philip Sidney called a "golden world" to defy the "brazen world" of nature, that it offer us ideal melodies which transcend and to some extent rebuke the world of sensual music. It is a constant part of our desires, this hankering for an absolute and purely delineated world of wisdom and beauty, and it sometimes asks literature to climb the stair of transcendence and give us images free from the rag-and-bone-shop reek of time and place. Such a dream of perfection is best served by a language which gives the illusion of absolute authority, of a purity beyond dialect and tribe, an imperial lexicon, in fact, a Roman vocabulary which is socially and historically patrician. (*EI* 9)

For Eliot, Dante was enviable for possessing such authority based on linguistic, philosophical and theological coherence. In this, he recreates Dante as a poet who stands for 'the thoroughly hierarchical world of scholastic thought, an imagined standard against which the relativity and agnosticism of the present can be judged' (*EI* 14): his ultimate attraction to Dante is 'the way the figure of the poet as thinker and teacher merged into the figure of the poet as expresser of a universal myth that could unify the abundance of the inner world and the confusion of the outer' (*ibid*). By contrast, Mandelstam's 'Conversations about Dante' makes the 'mouth water' and transmits, with the personal neediness and rapture of an exile in his thirties, 'a fever of excitement in the actual phonetic reality of the work and shares with us the sensation of his poet's delight turning into a sort of giddy critical wisdom'.

Mandelstam's profile of Dante is 'the apotheosis of free, natural, biological process, as a hive of bees, a process of crystallization, a hurry of pigeon flights, a focus for all the impulsive, instinctive, non-utilitarian elements in the creative life' (*EI* 18). Like Mandelstam, he aspired to follow the 'impulsive, instinctive, non-utilitarian elements' represented by the stereometric instinct of bees (an image which was to be used for the cover of *The Spirit Level* in 1996), and the freedom of birds in flight which had been central to *Station Island* in the previous

year: 'I mastered new rungs of the air | to survey out of reach' ('The First Flight', *SI* 103).

Mandelstam's Dante, Heaney argues, is 'the most eager, most inspiring, the most delightfully approachable recreation we could hope for', but there is also respect for Eliot's vision which shines through the concluding affirmation of the way in which Dante could 'place himself in an historical world yet submit that world to scrutiny from a perspective beyond history, the way he could accommodate the political and the transcendent' (*EI* 18).

In November 1985, the ether of the completive mind and the hankering after an absolute and purely delineated world of wisdom resurfaced as artistic objectives when Heaney delivered a lecture entitled "'The Placeless Heaven": Another Look at Kavanagh', an outline of his newly developed poetic imagination and a revision of his earlier reading of Patrick Kavanagh's transcendental poems. The focus of Heaney's vision is now an empty space at Mossbawn, his original childhood home, where a now-felled chestnut tree had been planted to mark his birth:

In my mind's eye I saw it as a kind of luminous emptiness, a warp and waver of light, and once again, in a way that I find hard to define, I began to identify with that space just as years before I had identified with the young tree.

Except that this time it was not so much a matter of attaching oneself to a living symbol of being rooted in the native ground; it was more a matter of preparing to be unrooted, to be spirited away into some transparent, yet indigenous afterlife. The new place was all idea, if you like; it was generated out of my experience of the old place but it was not a topographical location. It was and remains an imagined realm, even if it can be located at an earthly spot, a placeless heaven rather than a heavenly place. (*GT* 3)

This spiritual development resulted in a new estimation of Kavanagh: when Kavanagh wrote

about places in his later poetry, Heaney argues, ‘they are luminous spaces within his mind. They have been evacuated of their status as background, as documented geography, and exist instead as transfigured images, sites where the mind projects its own force’ (*GT* 5). Now Kavanagh is seen in his mature ‘process of world mastery’, the locus of place is only made important by the light of the mind playing upon it, feeling for that which goes beyond the material and incidental. Heaney responded to the late works, but ‘did not immediately recognise their visionary intent, their full spiritual daring’. Kavanagh’s ‘In Memory of My Mother’ may be a catalogue of actual memories, but its ‘solidly based phenomena are transformed by a shimmer of inner reality’ (*GT* 10). The mystic in Kavanagh is present in ‘Auditors In’, where he exclaims: ‘I turn away to where the Self reposes | The placeless Heaven that’s under all our noses’; he is ‘so glad’ to have come ‘accidentally upon | My self at the end of a tortuous road’ and to have ‘learned with surprise that God | Unworshipped withers to the Futile One’ (*GT* 11).<sup>19</sup> Heaney describes this poem in evangelical terms as ‘an altogether non-literary act’ and, with what Kavanagh began to think of as his comic point of view, ‘an abandonment of a life in order to find more abundant life’ (*GT* 12). Late Kavanagh abdicates from ‘the old world of ego’ and eradicates the distinction between the self and the world ‘out there’, existing ‘afloat above his native domain, airborne in the midst of his own dream place rather than earthbound in a literal field’ (*GT* 13). Heaney had sought to achieve similarly transformed perspective achieved ‘Sweeney Redivivus’, and he now reaffirms this aim in his identification with Kavanagh’s ‘abundance from a source from within’ which ‘spills over to irrigate the world beyond the self’ and marks ‘the pure moment of perception’ (*GT* 14). Kavanagh’s late aesthetic of ‘inner freedom’ is an example of ‘self-conquest, a style discovered to express this poet’s unique response to his universal ordinariness, a way of re-establishing the authenticity of personal experience and surviving as a credible being’ (*GT*

<sup>19</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, ‘Auditors In’, *Collected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2005), pp. 179–183.

14). But Kavanagh's example is also portrayed as meeting the challenge laid out by Rilke ('You must change your life') and achieving the objective identified by Yeats, a man for whom he had no affection:

The soul recovers radical innocence,  
And learns at last that it is self-delighting,  
Self-appeasing, self-affrighting,  
And that its own sweet will is Heaven's will.<sup>20</sup>

Taken as a whole, this key lecture is evidently a marker of Heaney's transition from the 'appetites of gravity' that imbue his early poems to the walking on air that—as I will describe—is characteristic of his later work.

In 1986, Heaney used the T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures to further muse on the search for enlightenment. The eponymous lecture is largely derivative of 'Envies and Identifications', but it also offered Heaney a chance to refine his view of poetry as a vehicle for the perception and representation of metaphysical order. The successful poem, he now avers, exemplifies a congruence between 'impulse and right action' which gives us 'premonitions of harmonies':

In this way, the order of art becomes an achievement intimating a possible order beyond itself, although its relation to that further order remains promissory rather than obligatory. Art is not an inferior reflection of some ordained heavenly system but a rehearsal of it in earthly terms; art does not trace the given map of a better reality but improvises an inspired sketch of it. (GT 94)

The focus is still on matters transcendent, although this sound less spiritually ambitious than in the past. From here Heaney attempts to balance the conception of poetry arising from its own inner laws (like Dante's seen through the eyes of Mandelstam) and the conception of a

<sup>20</sup> W.B. Yeats, 'A Prayer for My Daughter', *Collected Poems*, p. 211-214, pp.213-214.

poem arising from submission to a framework of belief and institutional religion (like the ‘intellectually pure, emotionally robust and entirely authentic’ poetry of George Herbert or the philosophical and religious truths of Eliot’s *Four Quartets*; *GT* 97). The conclusion at which he arrives betrays a certain frustration with his own apparent hesitancy between the two ideas: ‘The fact is that poetry is its own reality’, he asserts, ‘and no matter how much a poet may concede to the corrective pressures of social, moral, political and historical reality, the ultimate fidelity must be to the demands and promise of the artistic event’ (*GT* 101). In this view, poetry generates and participates in a transcendent perspective, cutting through the smokescreen of temporality and therefore apprehending, if only sketchily, the whole rather than the parts. For Heaney, the proof-text of breaking out of this entanglement is Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘At the Fishhouses’. Bishop’s poem, he argues, displays how disciplined attention to the surfaces of the world can itself stimulate ‘irruption of the visionary’. The lesson for Heaney is that the ‘dream-truth’ of poetry helps to ‘fortify our inclination to credit promptings of our intuitive being’ (*GT* 105-106). This arcane and yet redemptive view of poetry draws its final analogy from the eighth chapter of Mark’s Gospel in which Jesus writes in the sand while the scribes and Pharisees accost a woman accused of adultery. Poetry, like Jesus’s writing, ‘is arbitrary and marks time in every possible sense of that phrase’, holding our attention ‘for a space’ and ‘functions not as distraction but as pure concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back on ourselves’ (*GT* 108). In this way, poetry is conceived of as ‘more a threshold than a path’ (*ibid*), but either way the image reflects the fact that Heaney has evidently been following his own path of self-directed spiritual enlightenment.

The syncretism of Heaney’s spiritual instinct flickers throughout the Eliot lectures which focus on W.H. Auden, Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath. In ‘Sounding Auden’, for example, he quotes approvingly from Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*:

This is the eternal source of art: a man is faced by a form which desires to be made through him into a work. This form is no offspring of his soul but is an appearance which steps up to it and demands of it the effective power. The man is concerned with an act of his being. If he carries it through, if he speaks the primary word out of his being to the form which appears, then the effective power streams out, and the work arises.<sup>21</sup>

Buber's commentary on art, Heaney argues, provides 'a firm account of what in experience is elusive and tenebrous' (*GT* 117), which suggests assent to its spiritual terms notwithstanding the putative subject of Auden's dual loyalty to enchanting magic and rational intelligence. Turning to Buber's text, there is further analysis which chimes with Heaney's conception of poetry, after Kavanagh, as its own reality of the self in union with the great non-Self:

The *Thou* meets me. But I step into direct relation with it. Hence the relation means being chosen and choosing, suffering and action in one, just as any action of the whole being, which makes the suspension of all partial actions and consequently of all sensations of actions grounded only in their limitation, is bound to resemble suffering.

The primary *I-Thou* can be spoken only with the whole being. Concentration and fusion into the whole being can never take place through my agency, nor can it ever take place without me; as I become *I*, I say *Thou*.<sup>22</sup>

In *Seeing Things*, Heaney similarly writes of the moment of being 'in step with what escaped me' (*ST* 108). But the issue of agency is writ large across 'Lowell's Command', in which Heaney celebrates the way in which the American poet's self-willed drive eventually resulted (in his later poetry, if not his life) in an uncanny 'emotional calm that is completely

<sup>21</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1929, 1937), pp. 9-10.

<sup>22</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, p. 11.

impersonal, a condition evenly distanced from the infinite indifference on the minus side of the graph and the infinite serenity at the other extreme' (*GT* 145). In 'The Indefatigable Hoof-taps: Sylvia Plath', Heaney praises Plath's *Ariel* as a moment of 'astonished being' and her capacity, like Wordsworth's, to contemplate the 'goings-on of the universe' (*GT* 159), but regrets the way in which she harnessed cultural resonances to 'a vehemently self-justifying purpose, so that the supra-personal dimensions of knowledge—to which myth typically gives access—are slighted in favour of the intense personal need of the poet' (*GT* 168). As a corrective Heaney references the passage of Wordsworth's 1802 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* which describes the relationship between lyrical impulse and intellectual thought that, if the poet 'be in a healthful state of association, must necessarily be in some degree enlightened' (*GT* 169).<sup>23</sup> When, in 1988, Heaney collected these lectures in *The Government of the Tongue*, he wrote a short introduction which included a description of the achievement of writing a poem as 'a liberated moment' that is 'equidistant from self-justification and self-obliteration', a moment when a 'plane is—fleetingly—established where the poet is intensified in his being and freed from his predicaments' (*GT* xxii). In other words, it is a moment of enlightenment.

### **2.3. Inclusive Consciousness, 1988-1991**

In April 1988, Heaney delivered the inaugural Richard Ellmann lectures—collected in *The Place of Writing* in the following year—in which he promulgates the primacy of metaphysical vision. In the first lecture, 'W.B. Yeats and Thoor Ballylee', he outlines two central arguments: 'the poetic imagination in its strongest manifestation imposes its vision upon a place rather than accepts a vision from it', and this 'visionary imposition is never exempt from the imagination's antithetical ability to subvert its own creation' (*PW* 20). The

<sup>23</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Preface', *Lyrical Ballads* (London: T.N. Longman & O. Rees, 1802), pp. xi-xii.

power of the aesthetic over material reality is symbolised by Yeats's Galway tower. In Heaney's estimation, it is 'a sacramental site, an outward sign of inner grace' and 'one of the soul's monuments of its own magnificence' (*PW* 24). He celebrates Yeats's portrayal of—and explicit assent to—Bishop Berkeley's idealism in 'Meditations in Time of Civil War', where the 'pragmatical, preposterous pig of a world, its farrow that so solid seem, | Must vanish';<sup>24</sup> as Heaney acknowledges, the world does not vanish, but the poem nevertheless stands for what he calls the manifestation of 'the fortified mind, besieged yet ablaze, exalted and incontrovertible' (*PW* 27). With 'artistic faith' in images and emblems rather than conventional readings of the world, the poem exemplifies for Heaney the act of 'holding fast, living in a fastness, fastening the mind upon the certain tragedy of one's extinction and still refusing, even in the face of that extinction' (*PW* 28), to cede the value of what Yeats called "The spiritual intellect's great work".<sup>25</sup> Despite historical reality, the mind is 'not allowed to cave in to a passive acceptance of the deplorable', and its responsibility to 'its own affirmative project is not absolved by its perception of the foredoomed nature of that project' (*PW* 30). In this way, Heaney argues, Yeats's tower ascends much like Rilke's 'Orpheus' ('A tree ascended there. Oh pure transcendence!'),<sup>26</sup> an image of comparable symbolic force—what Heaney calls poetic evidence of 'exaltation and absolutism' (*PW* 30)—to the uprooted chestnut tree in 'Clearances' (*HL* 20). The transfiguration of Thoor Ballylee is therefore 'a prayer for concentration which is focused and shining with an inward, self-directed illumination' (*PW* 33); Yeats embraced the 'dialectic between the spirit's indomitable, affirmative impulses and the mind's capacity to ironize and mock those impulses as self-serving fictions' (*PW* 34), an idealism which supports Heaney's apparent belief in the

<sup>24</sup> W.B. Yeats, 'Blood and the Moon', *Collected Poems*, pp. 267-269, p. 268.

<sup>25</sup> W.B. Yeats, 'The Man and the Echo', *Collected Poems*, pp. 393-395, p. 394.

<sup>26</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, 'First Part', *Sonnets to Orpheus*, trans. J.B. Leishman (London: The Hogarth Press, 1936, rep. 1949), p. 35.



imagination as ‘a truth-seeking and truth-augmenting faculty’ (*PW* 35). Like much of his literary criticism, Heaney’s own quest for enlightenment is implicated in this interpretation of another poet. *The Haw Lantern*, published in 1987, imposes visions upon geographical locations (‘a bright nowhere’, *HL* 32) and embraces emptiness as the ultimate nature of reality (‘a space | Utterly empty, utterly a source’, *HL* 32).. Heaney was also working on the manuscript of *Seeing Things* at this time, a volume in which the imagery of illumination is characteristically ‘focused and shining’: ‘silver lamé shivered on the Bann’ (*ST* 108).

In ‘Cornucopia and Empty Shell: Variations on a Theme from Ellmann’, Heaney further elaborates on the notion of emptiness as a pregnant source. At the outset he explicates his own poem, ‘The Disappearing Island’ (*HL* 50), which he describes as an expression of ‘two opposing truths’: on the one hand, everything that happens in the poem is ‘hallucination, unreliably subjective, self-denuding even, and therefore not to be credited’; yet because the experience was ‘self-born and possessed the eerie lucidity of dream-vision, its unique aura transcends the banal reliabilities of the usual and commands the assent of awakened imagination’ (*PW* 54-55). As the title of the lecture suggests, this image aims towards the principles of enlightened imagination which Heaney read in Ellmann’s ‘W.B. Yeats’s Second Puberty’: ‘As Yeats reached life’s end’, Ellmann writes, ‘he recognised that he would never be able to decide between the beatific vision and its obverse. The image of life as cornucopia was relentlessly undermined by the image of life as empty shell’ (*PW* 56).<sup>27</sup> But Heaney also recognises this as two different perspectives of the same thing in contemporary Irish writers. Similarly, Brian Friel’s *Faith Healer* is characterised as a play by which one is forced to ‘look into that space which opens between hope and reality’, one that ‘most of us prefer to close our eyes to’: the light of the imagination ‘invites us to sacrifice our actual situation to a

<sup>27</sup> Richard Ellmann, *W.B. Yeats’s Second Puberty: A lecture delivered at the Library of Congress on April 2, 1984* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1985), p. 27

vision of our possibilities which is doomed to fail' (*PW* 65). In this drama, Friel is 'expressing in terms of faith-healing *his* awareness of the necessity in the mature artist of a preparedness for a *via negativa*' (*PW* 65-66)—a Christian theological term which broadly expresses the idea that God, as transcendent, is best conceptualised by delineating what He is *not*; in *The Haw Lantern*, Heaney employed a secularised version of this idea (see 'The Riddle', *HL* 51).

During his time at Emory University in April 1988 Heaney also gave an interview to Rand Brandes in which he couched this synthesis of thought—emptiness as the constituent element of reality—within a framework provided by philosophy of religion. Heaney states: 'I believe the condition in which I was born and into which my generation in Ireland was involved the moment of transition from the sacred to the profane'.<sup>28</sup> In this assessment Heaney is borrowing terms of Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and Profane*, who states that 'profane man cannot help preserving some vestiges of the behaviour of religious man, though they are emptied of religious meaning':

Do what he will, he is an inheritor. He cannot utterly abolish his past, since he himself is the product of his past. He forms himself by a series of denials and refusals, but he continues to be haunted by the realities that he has refused and denied. To acquire a world of his own, he has desacralised the world in which his ancestors live; but to do so he has been obliged to adopt an earlier type of behaviour, and that behaviour is still emotionally present to him, in one form or another, ready to be reactualized in his deepest being.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in Rand Brandes, 'Seamus Heaney: An Interview', *Salmagundi* 80 (1988), p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> Mircea Eliade, 'Human Existence and the Sanctified Life', *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion: The significance of religious myth, symbolism, and ritual within life and culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc, 1959), pp. 162-215, p. 204.

In this context, Heaney is the profane man with inherited religious impulses ready to be realised. Heaney suggested that finishing *Station Island* drew him closer to an image of ‘emptiness and potential stream in opposite directions’,<sup>30</sup> a conception which resembles the Taoist idea of emptiness as potential. Heaney, on this evidence, considered his aesthetic project to be intimately bound up with the theological contexts of Ireland in so far as it the area of thought with which the poet engages; the gesture to Eliade universalises his metaphysical concern, transcending cultural and national borders.

The reflection was to continue during Heaney’s time as Oxford Professor of Poetry. His inaugural lecture, ‘The Redress of Poetry’, provided a variation on yet another theme by Richard Ellmann. For the enlightened imagination Heaney coined the phrase ‘a working model of inclusive consciousness’ (*RP* 8), the terms of which echo Ellmann’s *The Identity of Yeats*:

The conception of affirmative capability provides, in short, that poetry must centre on affirmations or the struggle for affirmations, that it must satisfy the whole being, not the moral, intellectual, or passionate nature alone, and that it must present a vision of reality. Our backs against the wall, we cannot decide whether reality is adequately described by our intimations of a state of completeness, or whether it is desirable only as the opposite of all that we can see and imagine. In either case the artist must be its interpreter. Affirmative capability does not free him from the responsibility of intellectual search or understanding of experience, as negative capability might seem to; rather it forces him to live, as well as to write, in such a way that his consciousness will be inclusive.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in Rand Brandes, ‘Seamus Heaney: An Interview’, p. 6.

<sup>31</sup> Richard Ellmann, ‘The Art of Yeats’, *The Identity of Yeats* (London: Penguin, 1954), p. 224.

Whether or not Heaney had read this text, it certainly chimes with the intellectual and spiritual development of his writing since his Ellmann lectures: having previously recognised the necessity possibilities of the *via negativa*, Heaney is now committed to a more positive approach to enlightened perception. In his opening remarks, for example, he alludes to French philosopher and Christian mystic Simone Weil, whose thesis in *Gravity and Grace* that '[obedience] to the force of gravity [is the] greatest sin' corresponds to poetry's 'refinement of the mind's extreme recognitions' and language's 'most unexpected apprehensions' (*RP* 3): Weil tilts the scales of reality 'towards some transcendent equilibrium', an analogous act of poetry which places a counter-reality in the scales: 'a reality which may be only imagined but which nevertheless has weight because it is imagined within the gravitational pull of the actual and can therefore hold its own and balance out against the historical situation' (*RP* 3-4). The scales have been tipped away from the negative shape of things towards the spirit's indomitable, affirmative impulses. Václav Havel's philosophical definition of hope, as 'a state of mind' and 'dimension of the soul' with roots in the transcendental: 'It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons' (*RP* 4).<sup>32</sup> John Dennison has argued that Heaney, by including Havel, 'installs a corroboration of his transcendental humanist poetics', an ultimately vague inference that poetry manifests 'a transcendence of existence'.<sup>33</sup>

But that is perhaps going too far; Heaney is tipping the scales towards the transcendent at this juncture in his prose, as he also does his poetry: in *Seeing Things*, he demonstrates this orientation of the heart ('Time to be dazzled and the heart to lighten'; *ST* 50). Another figure of affirmative spirituality is George Herbert, whose name figured

<sup>32</sup> Václav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 181.

<sup>33</sup> 'John Dennison, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 182.

prominently in the manuscripts of the lecture, which suggests, as Dennison rightly argues, that Heaney was intent on transcendent affirmations.<sup>34</sup> Heaney cherished ‘the ideal mental and emotional climate’ of Herbert’s poetry, one which offers ‘a true paradigm of the shape of things, psychologically, politically, metaphorically, and, if one wants to proceed that far, metaphysically’ (*RP* 9, 10). ‘In its unforced way’, Heaney concluded, Herbert’s poetry contains ‘within itself the coordinates and contradiction of experience, and would be as comprehensible within the cosmology of Yin and Yang as it is amenable to the dialectics of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis’ (*RP* 12-13). Heaney’s allusion to ‘Yin and Yang’—a concept from ancient Chinese philosophy which signifies the complementarity of opposites—demonstrates familiarity with eastern spiritual traditions, which, in addition to his allusion to ‘the dialectics of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis’ that evokes the German idealism of Johann Fichte, provides evidence of the syncretic tendency that characterises that underpins his inclusive consciousness.

The principles of Heaney’s affirmative ideal of inclusive consciousness are further corroborated by ‘Keeping Time’, a conference paper he delivered at Kyoto in July 1990. Heaney quotes approvingly from Czeslaw Milosz’s 1979 interview in *Poetry Australia*: discussing ‘Aubade’, Milosz laments the way in which Larkin endows death with ‘the supreme authority of Law and universal necessity’, reducing man to ‘an interchangeable statistical unit’.<sup>35</sup> Milosz rejects ratiocination, suggesting that Larkin forgets the ‘ancient mutual hostility between reason, science and science-inspired philosophy on the one hand and poetry on the other’: ‘Faith in life everlasting’, Milosz concluded, ‘has accompanied man in his wanderings through time, and it has always been larger and deeper than religious or philosophical creeds which express only one of its forms’ (*ibid*). Heaney develops a revealing

<sup>34</sup> ‘Doing Time: An Apology for Poetry’, holograph notes, Seamus Heaney Papers 1951-2004, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, quoted in John Dennison, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 147.

<sup>35</sup> Czeslaw Milosz, quoted in ‘The Real and the Paradigms’, *Poetry Australia*, No. 72, October 1979, pp. 18-24.

interpretation of Milosz's outlook:

Obviously he does not want poets to begin spouting optimistic, religious effusions. He would be the last person to substitute for the poetry of reality some bland rhapsody about God in his heaven and all is right with the world. The proclamation that poetry is on the side of life should not be taken to mean that Milosz is in favour of poets averting their eyes from the death-dealing elements at work in our lives, in Northern Ireland or anywhere else. We are to rejoice, yes; but as T.S. Eliot clearly and unconsolingly stated, we have to construct something upon which to rejoice. It is the work of making meanings which will not collapse in the face of the evidence [...]<sup>36</sup>

Heaney adopts Milosz's attitude as his own. When, later in October 1990, Heaney delivered his second Oxford lecture, 'Joy or Night': Last Things in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats and Philip Larkin', he reaffirmed this view of Milosz's conviction, arguing in defence of the aesthetic benefits of a willingness to acknowledge the possibility of supernatural experience. Challenging Larkin's 'inexorable fixation with [physical extinction]' (*RP* 147), he argues that Yeats's embrace of the supernatural was 'not at all naïve; he was as alive as Larkin to the demanding force of death, but he deliberately resisted the dominance of the material over the spiritual' (*RP* 150). Heaney celebrates what he calls Yeats's promotion of the idea that 'there exists a much greater, circumambient energy and order within which we have our being' (*RP* 149). In resisting the dominance of the material over the spiritual, Yeats embodies for Heaney a 'frame of mind which allowed the venturesomeness of a supernatural faith to co-exist with a rigorously sceptical attitude' (*RP* 151). This is a supreme instance of Heaney

<sup>36</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'Keeping Time: Irish Poetry and Contemporary Society', in *International Aspects of Irish Literature*, edited by T. Furomonto et al (Gerards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1996), pp. 247-262, pp. 259-260.

finding support for his self-conceptualisation as a sceptical mystic, looking to another writer who somehow manages to reconcile the greatest of transcendent ambitions with the most judicious scepticism.

In June 1991, Heaney gave an interview to *The Economist* in which he discusses the implications of *Seeing Things* and contributes another set of remarks to this rich few years of affirmative thought. He describes the recovery of his spirituality after years of secularization:

And then, suddenly, you say: well, wait! Eternal life can mean utter reverence for life itself. And that's what there is. And our care in a green age, so to speak, in an age that's conscious of the ravages that have been done to the planet, the sacred value is actually eternal life. So that language is perfectly proper. It can be used again. It can be revived. It's not necessarily a mystifying language. It's a purifying language. And I suppose that's what I would like to do... This was not an ambition, but it is a kind of apologia for using words like soul and spirit. You want them to... yes, to be available, to purify possibilities again.<sup>37</sup>

Heaney again shows us again that, rather than merely imitating the language of Catholicism, he wanted to genuinely convey the elusive feeling of a spiritual dimension; on the other hand, he would later note how the death of his parents showed him that Catholic theological terms corresponded well enough to the metaphysical truths—‘the spirit of life that is within us’—which *philosophia perennis* seeks to identify in all religions.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in ‘A Soul on the Washing Line’, *The Economist*, 22 June 1991, pp. 122-126, p. 126. Rep. 5 September 2013 <<https://www.economist.com/prospero/2013/09/05/a-soul-on-the-washing-line>> [accessed September 2013].

<sup>38</sup> See also Henri Cole, ‘Seamus Heaney: The Art of Poetry, No.75’, *Paris Review*, Issue 144, Fall 1997 <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1217/the-art-of-poetry-no-75-seamus-heaney>> [accessed June 2015]; George Morgan, ‘Interview with Seamus Heaney’, *Cynos*, Vo. 15, No.2, *Irlande - Exils* June 2008 <<http://revel.unice.fr/cynos/?id=1594>> [accessed April 2016]; Eleanor Wachtel, ‘An Interview with Seamus Heaney’, *Brick*, 80. 2011. [accessed November 2018].

A similar sense of liberation characterises Heaney's interview with Melvyn Bragg for *The South Bank Show* later in October 1991. Bragg introduces *Seeing Things*, the centre-piece of discussion, as marking a major change in direction, one exemplified by 'Fosterling' ('Me waiting until I was nearly fifty to credit marvels', *ST* 50), and asks Heaney what has changed in his work. The poet answers by drawing a distinction between the poems in *Station Island* and those in *Seeing Things*: the former, he says, are preoccupied with 'the music of what happens' (a phrase taken from Fionn MacCumhaill in the Fenian Cycles, as well as 'Song' in *Field Work*) while the latter are preoccupied with 'the music of what *might* happen, the music of desire'.<sup>39</sup> From such possibilities for 'spaciousness and pleasure', Heaney speculated, comes 'greater comprehension' (*ibid*). But perhaps most useful for our purposes in this respect is Heaney's reflection on 'Markings', a poem which addresses what he calls the 'mini-miracle' (*ibid*) of children being able to see in the dark ('Youngsters shouting their heads off in a field | As the light died and they kept on playing | Because by then they were playing in their heads'):

It seemed to me to be a metaphor for the possibilities that reside in writing and in artistic activity generally—in music even. That you are amplified, extended, and so on. There's a little play in the poem on the phrase, 'extra time', which is a football term, but it's 'extra' in the sense of being outside time, the timeless moment, the sense of time stopping. And then it goes into memory in general, about what happens when the remembered is held up and becomes transfigured in memory. It says somewhere in the poem, 'these things entered you | As if they were both the door and what came through it. | They marked the spot, marked time and held it open'—I suppose that's a description of what I might like to do with a poem; that it be not just

<sup>39</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in Melvyn Bragg, *The South Bank Show*, Season 15, Ep. 6, London Weekend Television, 27 October 1991.



pictorial; that it be not just a documentary representation, but that it [has] an aura and a radiance and a sense of fullness and presence...and that it marked time. (ibid)

The most arresting phrase here is ‘marked time and held it open’: the transcendent dimension to which Heaney gestures is available through memory (which escapes time) and recalls Blake’s vision of holding ‘eternity in an hour’.<sup>40</sup> Heaney also unearths an important distinction here: ‘Markings’ is not only a metaphor for the possibilities of enlightened perception, but the vehicle for the transcendent (‘an aura and radiance and a sense of fullness and presence’) which conveys ‘a beatitude of being’. The epithet evokes the Beatitudes recorded in St Matthew’s ‘Sermon on the Mount’ and St Luke’s ‘Sermon on the Plain’, both of which promulgate the ideals of love, peace and humility. Again, these are universal qualities of enlightenment identified by *philosophia perennis*, so where Heaney’s use of ‘beatitude’ obviously prompts thoughts of a Christian context, it does not exclude other spiritual traditions—especially when the term is combined with ‘being’. In concluding that such attention to spiritual ambition constituted ‘being a poet for a change’, it is clear that Heaney felt he had earned his vision.

#### **2.4. A Solemn Order of Reality, 1992-2008**

After the publication of *Seeing Things* in 1991, Heaney’s conceptualisation of enlightenment increasingly conforms to the theological notion of grace—unselfconscious participation in the transcendental—which permits both subjective free will and non-attachment to self. Heaney would have first learned about this ideal in his Catholic education, which provided a scholastic framework of two key subdivisions: sanctifying and habitual grace. Sanctifying grace is defined as ‘an habitual gift, a stable and supernatural disposition that perfects the

<sup>40</sup> William Blake, ‘Auguries of Innocence’, *Poems of William Blake*, edited by W.B. Yeats (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1905), p. 90.

soul itself to enable it to live with God, to act by his love'. Habitual grace is 'the permanent disposition to live and act in keeping with God's call', as 'distinguished from actual graces which refer to God's interventions, whether at the beginning of conversion or in the course of the work of sanctification'.<sup>41</sup> Beyond the Catholic catechism, concepts resembling grace are similarly affirmed by various mystical and religious traditions. Chuang Tzu, for example, shows how grace can manifest in commonplace activities such as carving wood for musical instruments: the first step is reducing the mind to 'absolute acquiescence'.<sup>42</sup> As Huxley has written, some artists have practiced this kind of 'self-naughting which is the indispensable pre-condition of the unitive knowledge of the divine Ground' (ibid., 196). The archetypal figure of this in Heaney's work is the journeyman tailor of 'At Banagher': 'Self-absenting, both migrant and ensconced' (SL 67). In his prose and interviews, Heaney consistently praises this kind of self-forgetfulness.

Heaney's formulation of enlightenment as the transcendence of self can be discerned in his Oxford lecture of 20 October 1992, 'John Clare's Prog'. The poet-professor focuses on the following lines from 'Field-Mouse's Nest': 'The water oer the pebbles scarce could run | And broad cesspools glittered in the sun'.<sup>43</sup> Heaney argues this is not a self-conscious effect—it does not 'lift its eye to see what effect it is having on the reader'—but enacts a 'complete absorption' in 'special realism': 'The eye of the writer is concentrated utterly upon what is before it, but also allows what is before it deep access to what is behind it' (RP 67). Like the carpenter who does not think of adulation or fame, Clare's speaker, in Heaney's reading, achieves the special realism engendered by absolute acquiescence to reality. In 'The Gravel Walks', collected in *The Spirit Level*, Heaney paints a similar vision to Clare's,

<sup>41</sup> *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Vatican official website: *The Holy See*, 2000, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c3a2.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c3a2.htm) [accessed October 2018]

<sup>42</sup> Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, pp. 195-196.

<sup>43</sup> John Clare, 'Mouse's Nest', *John Clare: The Major Works*, edited by Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 263.

exclaiming that the ‘kingdom of gravel was inside you too’ (*SL* 39): ‘Deep down, far back, clear water running over | Pebbles of caramel, hailstone, mackerel-blue’ (*SL* 40). Heaney’s conceptualisation of enlightenment in these instances reaffirms grace as a universal human capacity: it does not require active searching for a transcendent dimension, but instead meditative practice which reveals reality as it truly exists; passive apprehension of divine Reality is enlightened perception.

The growing predominance of Heaney’s conviction in enlightened receptivity is further evident in ‘Counting to a Hundred: On Elizabeth Bishop’, another Oxford lecture delivered in 1992. Heaney identifies in Bishop ‘something marvellous’ in ‘assenting to things as they are’ (*RP* 173), which resembles what the Catholic catechism distinguishes as habitual grace. In his analysis of ‘Sandpiper’, a poem which concludes with a Blakean vision of the plentitude of reality: ‘The millions of grains are black, white, tan, and gray, | mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst’.<sup>44</sup> Heaney does not just consider the way in which ‘obsessive attention to detail can come through into visionary understanding’, he also suggests that the poem demonstrates Bishop’s ‘habitual’ attitude of ‘alertness and caution, of being menaced and being ready’ (*RP* 167). Given that Bishop’s imagery, along with Clare’s ‘Field-Mouse’s Nest’, informs ‘The Gravel Walks’, Heaney evidently associated complete absorption in detail—what he called special realism—with the psychological state of awakened receptivity. The lecture also has a kernel of the late spiritual outlook of *Human Chain*. Heaney writes that Bishop’s ‘attractive steadiness’ (*ibid*) is matched by a sense that technical matters are a distraction from the main business of ‘observing the world and discovering meaning’ (*RP* 182). Catholic theology would describe this as the habitual grace of a permanent disposition to live and act in keeping with divine Reality. In ‘Hermit Songs’,

<sup>44</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, ‘Sandpiper’, *Collected Poems: 1927-1979* (London: Chatto & Windus; The Hogarth Press, 1983), p. 131

a poem underpinned by the theology of non-attachment, Heaney will return—via St Macóige of Lismore and Czeslaw Milosz—to this relationship between ‘steadiness’ and the elusive, yet evocative, notion of ‘meaning’.

The model of higher consciousness underpins ‘For Liberation: Brian Friel and the Use of Memory’, an essay written in 1993. Heaney argues that Friel’s work, like Eliot’s ‘Little Gidding’, the poem to which the title of the essay refers, demonstrates ‘the momentary release from “confusion” which comes from a drama [completing] itself in accordance with its own inner necessities’.<sup>45</sup> Here Heaney plays upon Frost’s well-known idea of a momentary stay against confusion.<sup>46</sup> This notion of inner necessity implies an intrinsic aesthetic order that the writer taps into, like in ‘The Diviner’; but it also hints at the guiding order in Heaney’s selected quotation from ‘Prologue’ in *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*:

When we think of the unending growth and decay of life and civilizations, we cannot escape the impression of absolute nullity. Yet I have never lost a sense of something that lives and endures underneath the eternal flux. In the end the only events in my life worth telling are those when the imperishable world erupted into this transitory one...<sup>47</sup>

Jung’s theory warranted for Heaney serious consideration in the face of a secularised world where, in the wake of Marxism and postcolonial studies, economic and political factors are often regarded as having the greatest influences over personal identity: ‘[The] necessity to be a single person is still felt as an imperative, a necessity to get some self-integrating hold upon

<sup>45</sup> Seamus Heaney, ‘For Liberation: Brian Friel and the Use of Memory’, p. 229.

<sup>46</sup> Robert Frost, ‘The Figure a Poem Makes’, *Collected Poems* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964), pp. v-viii, p. vi.

<sup>47</sup> Carl Jung, ‘Prologue’, *Memories, Dreams and Reflections* (London: Fontana Press, New Edition, 1995), p. 4, quoted in Seamus Heaney, ‘For Liberation: Brian Friel and the Use of Memory’, pp. 234-36.

our “confusion”, upon the randomness and contradictions of what we experience’.<sup>48</sup> In thus arguing that Friel’s work embodies this quest to convert impulse and memory into a ‘spiritually purposeful and value-engendering existence’ (ibid., 240).

Heaney explicitly evokes the theology of sanctifying grace in ‘God Moves in Mysterious Metres’, a panel discussion at the Melbourne Poetry Festival in 1994. When a member of the audience asked if poetry has fundamentally been a form of rewriting the presuppositions of organised religion, Heaney offers an assessment of his old Catholicism. He recalls his ‘huge jubilant sense of the dimensions of reality, a sense that one’s own minimal cobweb presence was part of a shimmering infinity and had every right to be part of it, a sense of sanctifying grace as something totally unknowable and elevating and attainable—almost’.<sup>49</sup> Heaney suggested that he wanted his work to evoke in readers this Catholic vision, which suggests that the mechanics of writing also depend on sanctifying grace, telling the audience: ‘I have allowed soul and spirit not only into my vocabulary but into my being somehow’ (ibid). As Heaney would continue to state throughout the rest of his life, he recovered the spiritual value of his former faith without accepting or assenting to its deistic theology. His language here is revealing: it betrays a victory over both secular materialism and orthodox religion, an outgrowing of the dichotomy between scepticism and mysticism; the poet is free to exist in a class of ‘anti-metaphysical metaphysicians who combine all the trappings of agnosticism with all the yearnings of religion’.<sup>50</sup>

This ideal of innate capacity within the human being for receiving grace is also part of the perspective which Heaney adopts in ‘Something to Write Home About’, a BBC television

<sup>48</sup> Seamus Heaney, ‘For Liberation: Brian Friel and the Use of Memory’, p. 239.

<sup>49</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in ‘God Moves in Mysterious Metres’, *Melbourne Writers’ Festival* (1994), online recording, *ABC Radio National*, produced by Margaret Coffey, uploaded Sunday 29 January 1995 <<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/archived/encounter/god-moves-in-mysterious-metres/6362332>> [accessed April 2018].

<sup>50</sup> Bruce Stewart, ““Visionary Gleams”: The Metaphysical Colloquy of Derek Mahon and Seamus Heaney”, pp. 139-155. p. 139.

documentary which aired in 1998. Focusing on topographical boundaries as ‘necessary evils’, Heaney describes the ‘truly desirable condition [of] feeling unbounded, of being king of infinite space’:

And it is this double capacity that we possess as human beings—the capacity to be attracted at one and the same time to the security of what is intimately known and the challenges and entrancements of what is beyond us—it is this double capacity that poetry springs from and addresses. A good poem allows you to have your feet on the ground and your head in the air simultaneously. (*FK* 48-49)

The spiritual life that is ‘within us’ depends on this capacity, as Heaney reiterates in the concluding paragraph of his essay: ‘it does not ask you to take your feet off the ground but it refreshes your vision by keeping your head in the air and bringing you alive to the open sky of possibility that is within you’ (*FK* 58). The sense of keeping one’s feet on the ground obviously echoes the idea of humility as well as retaining an awareness of domestic, political and social realities. But it also recasts the imagery of ‘Hercules and Antaeus’, in which emotional attachment (symbolised by the earth-hugging Antaeus) is uprooted by the rational intellect (symbolised by the sky-dweller Hercules). Now the relationship between earth and sky connotes an innate human capacity for spiritual enlightenment: in ‘The Skylight’, Heaney apprehends a revelation of ‘extravagant | Sky’ (*ST* 37), and in ‘The Gravel Walks’, he affirms the power to open the doors of perception (‘The kingdom of gravel was within you too’, *SL* 39).

Heaney’s increasing assent to this universal capacity for spiritual illumination is evident in the contribution to his wife’s book, *Sources: Letters from Irish People on Sustenance for the Soul* in 1999. As he did in Melbourne in 1994, Heaney makes a more

serious effort than some of his fellow correspondents, pondering a heightened awareness and contemplation of not so much *where* as *how* the spirit lives:

‘Spiritual sustenance’, meaning whatever sustains the spirit, supports it from below, maintains its vitality and reinforces its sense of its own validity. What sustains is more returnable to, less surprising, less intense, more tried and chosen. In fact, it can sometimes seem that your sustenance ends up choosing you rather than the other way around.<sup>51</sup>

Here is a model definition of grace: being ‘chosen’ as a vehicle for higher work. As the text which increasingly provides him sustenance, he quotes in full Blake’s ‘Auguries of Innocence’, in which he identifies its combination of ‘great simplicity’ and ‘intellectual concentration’ of truths with those enshrined in Zen *koans* that ‘go straight to the heart of personal and public reality’ (ibid). Heaney also compares the poem to ‘The Sermon of the Mount’, arguing that it ‘calls you towards the horizon of your understanding and your moral obligation’: ‘It doesn’t hector, it takes you back to a time when you had a more pristine sense of spiritual challenge. To read it is to go for a wade in the river of life. It is not otherworldly’ (ibid., 161). While a reduction in the intensity of Heaney’s transcendent ambitions or ‘challenge’ is discernible in his later poems, this brief letter is a sign that—towards the end of his life—his spiritual efforts were finding their reward. It results in a more relaxed understanding that the transcendent is not a dimension to be attained through striving, but a state of mind informed by the acceptance and letting go.

In a long interview with Karl Miller published in 2000, Heaney makes the explicit connection between his poetics and the theological ideal of grace:

<sup>51</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in *Sources: Letters from Irish People on Sustenance for the Soul* edited by Marie Heaney (Dublin: Townhouse, 1999), p. 160.

I think poetry has as much to do with *numen* as with hegemony. I have some notion of poetry as a grace, and I'm coming to believe that there may have been something far more important in my mental formation than cultural nationalism or the British presence or any of that stuff: namely, my early religious education. From a very early age, my consciousness was always expanding in response to the expanding universe of Catholic teaching about eternity and the soul and the sacraments and the mystical body and the infinite attentiveness of the Creator to your inmost thoughts. I didn't have to wait to read the *Paradiso* to know the vision it enshrines.<sup>52</sup>

The determiner ('a grace') indicates that Heaney considered poetry a manifestation of grace consonant with the theological sense that marks his self-portrait in this passage. He may have had an intuitive knowledge of the light-filled empyrean of Dante's vision, but he did have to wait until his own work could enshrine the dimensions of reality to which his previous faith initially provided access: in *Seeing Things*, he perceives the Heraclitean flux and spaces of what he identifies here as the expanding universe of Catholicism. Thanks to that enlightened vision, Heaney could enjoy the sanctifying grace in what he described—without deference or embarrassment to the sceptical part of his personality—as his renewed understanding of himself as an essentially spiritual creature.

Heaney's mature understanding of spirituality as a matter of enlightenment defines his perspective in 'Bags of enlightenment', an article on collaboration with Ted Hughes which he contributed to *The Guardian* in 2003. Heaney describes poetry as having the potential to be a 'pre-natal possession, a guarantee of inwardness and a link to origin'.<sup>53</sup> Typically, he characterises this in religious terms: poetry 'can become the eye of a verbal needle through

<sup>52</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in Karl Miller, *Karl Miller in Conversation with Seamus Heaney* (London: Between the Lines, 2000), pp. 32-33.

<sup>53</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'Bags of enlightenment', *The Guardian*, Saturday 25 October 2003  
<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/oct/25/poetry.highereducation>> [accessed August 2017]



which the growing person can pass again and again until it is known by heart' and thus becomes 'a path between heart and mind, a path by which the individual can enter, repeatedly, into the kingdom of rightness' (ibid). This modification of the Kingdom of Heaven and the biblical term 'righteousness' is an example of Heaney employing playfulness to make a serious point: the spatial metaphor suggests a state of reality as it truly exists.

Dennis O'Driscoll's *Stepping Stones*—the closest thing we have to Heaney's autobiography<sup>54</sup>—also contains passages in which enlightenment is a form of self-transcendence. He claims throughout the interviews that the key factor in inducing spiritual realisation through the medium of poetry depends on this transcendence of self: '[The] one simple rule of lyric writing is self-forgetfulness' (SS 88). The idea of self-forgetfulness is a central practice in many mystical traditions through which the self becomes wholly connected with the Godhead. Yet Heaney has also acknowledged elsewhere in the interviews that you 'can't be liberated from consciousness' (SS 424), and when O'Driscoll's question about what poetry 'taught' Heaney it would seem to complicate our understanding of these aspirations:

That there's such thing as truth and that it can be told—*slant*; that subjectivity is not to be theorized away and is worth defending; that poetry itself has virtue, in the first sense of possessing a quality of moral excellence and in the sense also of possessing inherent strength by reason of its sheer made-upness, its *integritas*, *consonantia* and *claritas*. (SS 467)

This trinity of *integritas*, *consonantia* and *claritas* recalls Thomas Aquinas's scholastic philosophical text, *Summae Theologiae*, which seeks to examine divine illumination of the

<sup>54</sup> Fintan O'Toole has been appointed Heaney's official biographer. See Martin Doyle, 'Fintan O'Toole to write Seamus Heaney's official biography', *The Irish Times*, 17 November 2017 <<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/fintan-o-toole-to-write-seamus-heaney-s-official-biography-1.3290690>> [accessed November 2017]

subjective mind (self-forgetfulness) using the metaphor of light. While self-forgetfulness and subjectivity are, by definition, oppositional, Heaney's placement of these two elements at the apex of his artistic values suggests they are paradoxically inter-reliant. Put otherwise, the quickest way to self-forgetfulness is through subjectivity. Heaney tries to clarify this issue, claiming that self-consciousness gives way to 'self-forgetfulness in the glee of finding words' (SS 218-219). His belief in the relationship between subjectivity and transcendence can therefore, again, be explained by the terms of grace provided by *philosophia perennis*: the personal self must strive towards an identification with the spiritual non-self—which takes the form of a favored branch of knowledge or activity (in this case, poetry)—to achieve enlightenment.<sup>55</sup>

The acceptance which underpins Heaney's formulation of grace is also discernible in *Stepping Stones*. In a passage where O'Driscoll asks him if he finds more visionary gleam in Kavanagh than in Yeats, Heaney suggests that he does not ('not as a reader, no') but argues that he is fundamentally closer to the Monaghan poet's Catholic mysticism. O'Driscoll probes further and asks if he ever considered writing a systematic philosophy like Yeats's *A Vision*; Heaney demurs and describes himself as having 'the Stephen Dedalus frame of mind': 'if you desert this system, you're deserting the best there is, and there's no point in exchanging one great coherence for some other ad hoc arrangement' (SS 318). Heaney pays tribute to the 'intellectual power' of Yeats's philosophical text but his qualification sounds a dog whistle to the sceptics: '[Yeats] wanted endorsement and access to the wisdom of the ages. When he constructed his system, he was satisfied that he had achieved this' (SS 319). So despite Heaney's lapsed Catholicism he much less discursively lays claim to the 'wisdom' of his religious upbringing when he argues that the opening poem of 'Squarings', with its scene of the particular judgement of the soul, retains a susceptibility to the 'numinous' (SS

<sup>55</sup> Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, p. 50.

319), a term literally meaning the presence of divinity. Towards the end of the book Heaney seems to provide an authoritative account of his inherited faith in this respect:

Catholicism provided a totally structured reading of the mortal condition which I've never quite deconstructed. I might have talked differently, certainly more diffidently, if you'd asked me about these matters thirty years ago, since I eventually did my best to change from catechized youth into secular adult. The study of literature, the discovery of wine, women, and song, the arrival of poetry, then marriage and family, plus a general assent to the proposition that God is dead: all that screened out the first visionary world. But, in maturity, the myths of the classical world and Dante's *Commedia* (where my Irish Catholic subculture received high cultural ratification) and the myths of other cultures matched and mixed and provided a cosmology, that corresponded well enough to the original: you learned that, from the human beginnings, poetic imagination had proffered a world of light and a world of dark, a shadow region—not so much an afterlife as an afterimage of life. (SS 471)

Mixing and matching the myths of various cultures is not only the definition of syncretism but it suggests acceptance of single truth—the divine Ground—upon which all cultures are based, meaning that Catholicism was the theological lens that, by happenstance, first revealed it.

*Stepping Stones* also includes a major statement on the spiritual dimension of poetry. O'Driscoll asks if Heaney accepts the premise that art is 'a means of redemption' and that 'God is a symbol for something that can as well take other forms, as, for example, the form of high poetry' (SS 470). Heaney claims to have no doubts about the second statement, adding that a loss of faith does not necessarily translate into a lost sense of 'ordained structure, beyond all this fuddle': 'Poetry is a ratification of the impulse towards transcendence' (SS

471-2). By associating the transcendent impulse with the intuition of supernatural order, Heaney reaffirms his mystical awareness of the circumambient energy in which he feels he has his being.

Indeed, Heaney's increasingly confident attitude about this idea is perhaps most evident in 'Apt Admonishment: Wordsworth as an Example', a lecture delivered by the poet in 2008. Wordsworth's poem is the putative subject, but Heaney has the broader concern with moments when poets become aware of the higher powers they serve. In an idiosyncratic illustration of his theory, the poet describes a Viking who, donning an amulet of Thor's hammer going into battle, will consider it 'just another practice that comes with his culture, something so habitual he may not even register its supernatural implications'.<sup>56</sup> For Heaney, this provides the basis upon which to describe his theme: 'The casual action has its origin in arcane mystery, an aura of the sacred glimmers in the background, and while the person involved may entertain no particular awareness of it, his actions are still deeply implicated in a solemn order of reality' (ibid). Heaney offers a revealing conclusion about the poet's brief awareness of his participation in this order:

Call it apt admonishment, call it contact with the hiding places, call it inspiration, call it the staying power of lyric, call it the bringing of memories that are luminous into the relatively dark world, call it what you like, but be sure it is what a poet's inner faith and freedom depends upon (ibid., 33)

In this, one of his final assessments of poetic vocation, Heaney is decidedly relaxed about the terms used by his readers to describe the source of his 'inner faith', an ambiguous epithet in itself. It is typical of his mature conceptualisation of enlightenment, an assent to a higher spiritual authority which depends on human free will and divinity, springing from the first in

<sup>56</sup> Seamus Heaney, "'Apt Admonishment": Wordsworth as an Example', p. 19.

the second. Across the course of his commentary in prose and interviews, Heaney retains his scepticism, but it is tempting, in the light of affirmations of the spiritual dimension, to call him a confirmed mystic.

### 3. Glimmerings: Enlightenment in the Early Poems

‘Long live the naturalist’, Christopher Ricks wrote in 1966 in one of the earliest reviews of *Death of a Naturalist*,<sup>1</sup> a critical sentiment which has been reiterated throughout Heaney’s career. Over thirty years later, for instance, on the eve of the millennium, John Carey averred that Heaney’s ‘scrupulous realism’ and ‘sensuous language’ had put him on equal footing with Keats.<sup>2</sup> Turning back to that first volume, there is ample evidence to support such glowing approbation for Heaney’s natural imagery. In the eponymous poem, he produces an exceptional synesthesia of bluebottles conceived as weaving ‘a strong gauze of sound around the smell’ of a flax-dam (*DN* 15). ‘Churning Day’ meticulously draws the mechanics and utensils of butter-churning to the point that the poet almost blurs the distinction between the objective material world and the subjective mind: ‘And in the house we moved with gravid ease, | our brains turned crystals full of clean deal churns’ (*DN* 24). Reading the poem, as Andrew Waterman aptly put it, ‘leaves one feeling one has made the butter oneself’,<sup>3</sup> and the strength of this artistic achievement can be perhaps further illustrated by Neil Corcoran’s decision to use this unique realism as an index of Heaney’s ‘metaphysics’.<sup>4</sup> The poet himself has specifically identified such sensuality with the early period of his work: in his interview given shortly after the publication of *Seeing Things*, he offers a useful description of his aesthetic principles: ‘In my first book, *Death of a Naturalist*, the whole effort of the writing was to solidify the thing in language, block it out, make it embossed, until it became a kind of

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Ricks, ‘Growing Up: Review of *Death of a Naturalist*’, *The New Statesman*, 27 May 1966, p. 778.

<sup>2</sup> John Carey, ‘Seamus Heaney’s *Death of a Naturalist*’, John Carey’s Books of the Century, *Sunday Times* (London, England) 17 Oct. 1999: 41[S8]. *The Sunday Times Digital Archive* <<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/FP1802741416/STHA?u=univulster&sid=STHA&xid=5fab9399>> [accessed October 2016]; ‘The most sensuous poet to use English since Keats’, *Sunday Times* [London, England] 3 Apr. 1988: 8 [S5]. *The Sunday Times Digital Archive* <<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/FP1802052359/STHA?u=univulster&sid=STHA&xid=c590c2f7>> [accessed December 2016].

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Waterman, ‘The Best Way Out is Always Through’, *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays* edited by Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Neil Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 208.

language braille of sorts'.<sup>5</sup> In previous comments on this juncture of his writing, he connected such realism with 'primitive delight in finding world become word' (*GT* 8), and, earlier still, in 1977, he implicitly contrasted his work to the 'metaphysical' aspect of the private mythologies written by his Northern Irish contemporaries, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, and Paul Muldoon (*P* 148). Yet despite Heaney's self-commentary, which consistently draws attention to his aim of accurate physical descriptions, as well as an attendant consensus from distinguished critics, there are hints of metaphysical preoccupations from the outset of his work. In this chapter I will seek to identify glimmers of an impulse towards transcendence in his early poetry that has otherwise been celebrated for its evocations of the natural world.

*Death of a Naturalist* contains several signs of nascent spirituality. 'The Diviner', for instance, encapsulates Heaney's conception of poetry as a mode of reading natural phenomena as a sign of 'invisible realities' (*P* 47):

Cut from the green hedge a forked hazel stick  
That he held tight by the arms of the V:  
Circling the terrain, hunting the pluck  
Of water, nervous, but professionally

Unfussed. The pluck came sharp as a sting.  
The rod jerked down with precise convulsions,  
Spring water suddenly broadcasting  
Through a green aerial its secret stations. (*DN* 36)

These 'secret stations' are somewhat more elusive, somewhat harder to place than the rural locations that serve as sources of inspiration elsewhere in the volume. To describe this implied relation between divination and poetry, Heaney finds his precedent in Sir Philip Sidney's *Apologie for Poetry*: 'Among the Romans a Poet was called Vates, which is as much as a Diviner...' (*P* 48). He also connects the mystical nature of divination with 'epiphany' in Wordsworth: the 'engendering, heightened state' that appears in *The Prelude*,

<sup>5</sup>Seamus Heaney, quoted in 'A Soul on the Washing Line', p. 122.

Heaney argues, and the magical perspective that allows Wordsworth to read phenomena as signs of the *genius loci*—the spirit of place—contributed to his ‘slightly abnormal, slightly numinous vision’ (*P* 51). Heaney also shows an embryonic predilection for defamiliarized, airborne perspectives in this book. ‘Honeymoon Flight’ describes the plane journey to London where he and his wife spent their honeymoon in 1964. The ‘sure green world’, the narrator tells us, ‘goes topsy-turvy | As we climb out of our familiar landscape’:

We hang, miraculous, above the water,  
Dependent on the invisible air  
To keep us airborne and to bring us further (*DN* 49)

The newly-weds are literally transcending the ‘patchwork earth’ (*DN* 49), and such images of flight— a ‘counter movement’ to the earthbound, Elmer Kennedy-Andrews argued, that denotes ‘the freedom of imagination’<sup>6</sup>— anticipate the miraculous ship which hangs on air in the story of Clonmacnoise recorded in *Seeing Things* (*ST* 62). Likewise, ‘St Francis and the Birds’ also shows signs of an impulse for spiritual ascent:

When Francis preached love to the birds  
They listened, fluttered, throttled up  
Into the blue like a flock of words  
  
Released for fun from his holy lips.  
They wheeled back, whirled about his head,  
Pirouetted on brothers’ capes,  
  
Danced on the wing, for sheer joy played  
And sang, like images took flight.  
Which was the best poem Francis made,  
  
His argument true, his tone light. (*DN* 53)

The incantatory music of these birds and the messages of love, to borrow from Terence Brown, exhibit a self-forgetful delight in artistic license that looks forward almost twenty years to ‘Sweeney Redivivus’ where Heaney adopts a persona who masters ‘new rungs of

<sup>6</sup> Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, ‘The Spirit’s Protest’, *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays* edited by Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), p. 210.



air' (SI 103).<sup>7</sup> The way in which St Francis speaks to the birds also strikingly resembles the mode of self-forgetful union with the eternal web of life celebrated in 'St Kevin and the Blackbird', a poem written thirty years in the future, appearing in *The Spirit Level* by which time the transcendent had come more clearly into Heaney's poetic field of vision. Another occurrence of Heaney's early tendency to dwell on the sense of self-transcendence can be seen in 'The Play Way'. This poem is based on his experience as a secondary school teacher in Belfast in the mid- 1960s ('My lesson notes read: Teacher will play | Beethoven's Concerto Number Five'), and it concludes with an image of the self-forgetful trance induced by the music, working 'its private spell behind eyes | That stare wide'. The students, Heaney tells us, 'have forgotten me | For once' (DN 56), and writing in a 'silence charged with sweetness', he says, 'They trip | To fall into themselves unknowingly' (DN 56). In his role as a teacher, Heaney is apparently trying to stimulate in students a freedom from convention and allow them to experience, like him, the liberating excitement of channelling in writing strange and unanticipated energy: creative expression is an approximate synonym for the escape from self.

*Death of a Naturalist* contains Heaney's mystical self-portrait as a Seer in 'The Diviner', but it also includes a more historical picture of the young writer in 'Personal Helicon'. In the poem, he identifies an elusive source of his mature artistic stimulus:

Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime,  
To stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring  
Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme  
To see myself, to set the darkness echoing. (DN 57)

Robert Welch argues that this poem suggests 'all the buried knowledge of tradition, all the intricate weave of language, will respond and thereby give authority, justice, and

<sup>7</sup> Terence Brown, 'The Witnessing Eye and the Speaking Tongue', *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays* edited by Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), p. 185.

*steadfastness* to the articulation'.<sup>8</sup> It seems more likely, however, that Heaney is prying into the depths of psychic and metaphysical 'darkness', which, in addition to a self-effacing reference to the mythic figure of Narcissus whose name was first appropriated by psychoanalysts to denote the condition of hyperbolic self-importance, seems to draw upon the Jungian concept of art as 'a glimpse into the unfathomable abyss of the unborn and things yet to be born'.<sup>9</sup> In an elegy for Heaney which draws upon this poem, Ciaran Carson writes 'that | unfathomable | darkness | echoes | still'.<sup>10</sup> While the epithet 'unfathomable | darkness' is undoubtedly deployed to mark a personal sadness over his friend's passing, Carson also seems to deliberately evoke the significance, and mystical nature, of darkness that emerges at the end of 'Personal Helicon': the 'darkness', Carson intimates, contains the 'unfathomable' numinous elements that extend beyond both the 'buried knowledge of tradition' and the ineluctable modality of the visible and form a central part of Heaney's spiritual enterprise. In the terms of *philosophia perennis*, the personal 'I' might be set up by the poet to be explored and interrogated with a view to entering what Huxley called the 'blessed Not-I'.<sup>11</sup>

'Personal Helicon' propels Heaney into the realms of a dark transcendent in his second volume. John Wilson Foster has criticised *Door into the Dark* for failing to live up to the psychoanalytic strenuousness implied by Heaney's declaration that he would 'set the darkness echoing', claiming that there is 'a marked reluctance to strike inwards, to cross the threshold, to explore the emotional and psychological sources of his fear'.<sup>12</sup> Notwithstanding the fact that Foster may be asking rather a lot of Heaney, who would perhaps have concurred with T.S. Eliot that writers cannot sound the sources of their imagery, 'for they come to

<sup>8</sup> Robert Welch, 'Poetic Freedom in Seamus Heaney', *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays* edited by Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 150-181, p. 153-154.

<sup>9</sup> Carl Jung, *The Spirit in Man, Art and Literature* (London: Ark, 1984), p. 96.

<sup>10</sup> Ciaran Carson, 'In Memory', *From Elsewhere* (Oldcastle: Galley Press, 2015), p. 23.

<sup>11</sup> Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1956), p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> John Wilson Foster, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 12.

represent the depths of feeling into which we cannot peer'),<sup>13</sup> there is evidence here of what Ruhul Amin Mandal called surrealistic evocations of a metaphysical world.<sup>14</sup> By the time he published *Door into the Dark*, Heaney had come to see himself as a writer whose work was rooted in 'the negative dark that presides in the Irish Christian consciousness'<sup>15</sup> with which his own psyche, we can infer, was inextricably bound up. In 1974, he said he conceived the book upon the imaginative premise that landscapes and language carried 'unnameable energies' (*P* 52), and that, at the same time, he was increasingly interested in the idea that the function of words is synonymous with the double-vision of Janus, the god of gateways, transitions and passages: 'Janus is to a certain extent their deity, looking back to a ramification of roots and associations and forward to a clarification of sense and meaning (*P* 52). In later years, he looked back on the book as partly a manifestation of his private need to explore the kind of 'magical' and 'otherworldly' feeling induced by summer excursions fishing on Lough Neagh, but he also emphasises an obscurer, and perhaps more urgent, aspiration to traverse the darkness in order to arrive at 'a reliable light' (*SS* 93). All of these comments coalesce into a pressing indication that the poet had come to suspect simple positivistic interpretations of outward reality and that he felt impelled to fortify, like Eliot, a mode of perception founded upon a nuanced and sceptical mysticism.<sup>16</sup>

The title of *Door into the Dark* is taken from the opening line of 'The Forge': 'All I know is a door into the dark' (*DD* 19), the narrator tell us, which instantly draws a distinction between the knowable 'door' and the unknowable 'dark'; the door becomes a kind of

<sup>13</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'Conclusion', *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), p. 148.

<sup>14</sup> Ruhul Amin Mandal, 'Seamus Heaney's *Door into the Dark* Opens Up Vertiginous Possibilities' *The Criterion: An International Journal in English Studies*. Volume 6. Feb 2015. <<http://www.the-criterion.com/seamus-heaneys-door-into-the-dark-opens-up-vertiginous-possibilities>> [accessed December 2017].

<sup>15</sup> Benedict Kiely, 'A Raid into Dark Corners', *The Hollins Critic* 7, No.4, pp. 1-12, quoted in Henry Hart, 'The Poetry of Meditation', *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1989), p. 34.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Ackroyd, 'Search for Faith', *T.S. Eliot: A Life* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984), p. 213.

spiritual gateway like that of the metaphor of Janus as a ‘deity’ for words, and the dark—employed as a noun—appears to be the numinous territory most commonly associated in the West with Christian mystics such as John of the Cross. In the kind of illuminated texts with which Heaney had first been made familiar as a pupil at St Columb’s College, Derry (and which he continued to read as an undergraduate at Queen’s University, Belfast) the ‘dark’ is linked to the dark night of sense, and the dark night of spirit: the former consists of a relinquishment of the senses with a view to achieving harmony between the soul and its spiritual nature; the latter is the purification of the spirit so that the soul can come into harmony with God.<sup>17</sup> Underpinning these sacred concepts is the paradoxical notion of non-effort and non-perception: desire for enlightenment is ultimately an affliction which prevents its manifestation. The darkness, mystics claim, offers knowledge beyond discourse and visionary states beyond conceivable images, and by recognising the centrality of self-denudation and therefore abandoning the desire for an apprehension based on our restricted capacities, it becomes what Dionysius the Areopagite, in *The Mystical Theology*, identified as the ‘the topmost height of mystic lore which exceedeth light and more than exceedeth knowledge, where the simple, absolute and unchangeable mysteries of heavenly Truth lie hidden in the dazzling obscurity of the secret Silence’.<sup>18</sup> Heaney imaginatively trespasses on the obscure and speechless space of the unknown:

The anvil must be somewhere in the centre,  
 Horned as a unicorn, at one end square,  
 Set there immoveable: an altar  
 Where he expends himself in shape and music. (DD 19)

The unicorn metaphor provides a clear indication that we have entered magical space, although a mystic might argue that the effort made by the blacksmith—like the poet working

<sup>17</sup> Letter from Seamus Heaney to Henry Hart (4 June 1987), quoted in Henry Hart, ‘The Poetry of Meditation’, *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1989), p. 35.

<sup>18</sup> Dionysius the Areopagite, *Dionysius the Areopagite on the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology* trans. C.E. Rolt (New York: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; Macmillan Company, 1920), p. 191.

towards the completion of the sonnet, he is ultimately working towards the completion of a premeditated final shape—is actually an impediment to enlightened perception. However, the poem also echoes the superior qualities with which blacksmiths are often credited in literature, mythology and philosophy. Vulcan, the Roman god of fire, was the patron of blacksmiths and is considered the great artisan who forged the thunderbolts of Jove, the trident of Neptune, the helmet of Plato, and the shield of Hercules. By the eighteenth-century, William Blake considered his mythological figure, Los, to be a blacksmith who laboured ‘Till a Form | Was completed, a Human Illusion | In darkness and deep clouds involv’d’.<sup>19</sup> Henry Hart has described the poem as an example of Heaney’s ‘unconventional meditative style’,<sup>20</sup> a phrase by which the critic means that the poem lacks the suffering and ascetic strain that the mystics normally promulgate as central to their mode of epistemology. Within the broader context of the oeuvre, ‘The Forge’ is an expression of Heaney’s desire to penetrate an alternative dimension, and the mystical nature of the ‘dark’ is made clearer still by his translation, in *Station Island*, from *The Dark Night of the Soul* by John of the Cross. The blacksmith metaphor, moreover, is rejuvenated in *District Circle*, where Heaney includes two poems (‘Poet to Blacksmith’ and ‘Midnight Anvil’) which are interconnected by a translation of Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin’s instructions to Séamus MacGearailt and references to ‘The Forge’ itself. The latter (‘Midnight Anvil’) is also embedded with quotations from the religious poetry of George Herbert (‘Prayer’).

Spiritual aspiration can also be detected in ‘The Peninsula’. ‘When you have nothing more to say,’ the speaker advises, ‘just drive | For a day all around the peninsula’ (*DD* 21). These apparently innocuous opening lines could be seen to reflect the mystics’ goal of channelling a source of illumination beyond ordinary knowledge and discourse. On the other

<sup>19</sup> William Blake, ‘The Book of Los’, *Selected Poems of William Blake*, edited by Basil De Selincourt (London: Oxford University Press, 1927), p. 340.

<sup>20</sup> Henry Hart, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 36.

hand, they could be seen as an effect of deep and ambiguous frustration. Heaney might also be said to show, then, a sense of the sheer elusiveness of the experience he is urging us to pursue; he concedes from the outset that ‘you will not arrive | But pass through, though always skirting landfall’ (*DD* 21), with the apparent futility of the exercise compounded by the subsequent assertion ‘you’re in the dark again’ (*DD* 21). The phrase ‘in the ‘dark’ usually means to be in a state of ignorance, but in this poem it seems to be considered by the writer rather as a state of unknowing to be embraced as a foundational element in a systematic meditation: by the conclusion of the poem it has apparently engendered a heightened appreciation of ‘things founded clean on their own shapes’ (*DD* 21). It is an attempt to lay down a kind of set pattern to induce spiritualised perception. The attraction for him in characterizing transcendence as silence will also be evident in ‘Glanmore Sonnets’ in *Field Work*.

Another instance of the car as transportational (in an imaginative sense) occurs in ‘Night-Drive’. The ‘smells of ordinariness’ (*DD* 34) are made strange during a night drive through France which is punctuated by the ‘whitened’ signs of exotic place-names:

Montrueil, Abbéville, Beauvais  
 Were promised, promised, came and went,  
 Each place granting its name’s fulfilment.     (*DD* 34)

Sexual desire, rather than the folk-lore of *dinnseanchas*, is the source of Heaney’s intense awareness of these French place-names. Gail McConnell argues that it ‘offers its own forms of sacramental signification as the speaker rejoices at the fulfilment of meaning, seeing the Real Presence of place contained within a name’,<sup>21</sup> but the conclusion of the poem intimates that the speaker may have been navigating the car with thoughts of a more palpable ‘fulfilment’:

I thought of you continuously

<sup>21</sup> Gail McConnell, “‘Its flesh was sweet | Like thickened wine’: Iconography and Sacramentalism in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney”, p. 97.

A thousand miles south where Italy  
Laid its loin to France on the darkened sphere.  
Your ordinariness was renewed there. (*DD* 34)

The ‘thought’ has conjured the sexual metaphor of Italy laying its loin to France, recalling England ‘laying its loin’ to Ireland (‘The rending process in the colony’) in ‘Act of Union’ (*N* 49). In ‘Night-Drive’, however, there are no postcolonial connotations; there is instead an implied anticipation in the poem of the physical fusion of man and woman and the attendant escape from the self, all of which occurs, of course, in darkness. It is one of several instances where Heaney writes about Marie when she is physically or geographically beyond him; often, as here, the poetry seems more quickened by her elusiveness than her proximity. In the wider context of the tripartite oeuvre, ‘Night-Drive’ looks forward to the way in which poems (especially in *Field Work*) that dwell on his partner not simply as a flesh and blood presence, but also as potential source of metaphysical repletion.

‘Bogland’, the last poem of *Door into the Dark* seems to mark a shift away from the quest for personal enlightenment. In ‘Bogland’, Heaney contrasts the Irish to Americans who look to the open spaces of the frontier:

Our pioneers keep striking  
Inwards and downwards,  
  
Every layer they strip  
Seems camped on before (*DD* 56)

Heaney claimed that writing this poem was a moment of ‘self-forgetfulness’ (*SS* 91), but fundamental spiritual and philosophic concerns have evidently been eclipsed: the image of the ‘pioneers’ working in the bogs expresses a new dominant subject of an Irish national spirit. It was a theme that would take on a darker shade with the intensification of violence in Northern Ireland. In his ‘Feeling into Words’ lecture in October 1974, Heaney recorded, in exasperation, the adverse effects of the riots in Belfast in 1969: ‘From that moment the problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal

icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament' (P 56). In the Christmas after the publication of *Door into the Dark*, Heaney bought himself P.V. Glob's *The Bog People* (SS 157-158), an anthropological study of men and women slaughtered during fertility rituals in Denmark. Having found these 'adequate' images, Heaney subsequently put aside personal metaphysics to concentrate on his enforced role as a political poet, but he still wrote poems which express, in recurring images of solitude, the spiritual nature of his most fundamental concerns.

Heaney's beleaguered acknowledgement of being forced off course from his private concerns is especially evident in 'Westering', the concluding poem of *Wintering Out*. Originally entitled 'Easy Rider',<sup>22</sup> the poem combines the movie of that name with John Donne's 'Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward' in order to convey the socially liberating experience of America and the gravitational pull of Ireland on his mind. Sat underneath Rand McNally's 'Official Map of the Moon', the poet immediately thinks of 'the last night | In Donegal'. Like a rogue motorcyclist from *Easy Rider*, Heaney imaginatively dawdles his engine outside a church in the north, where 'clappers smacked | On a bare altar' and 'congregations bent | To a studded Crucifix'. Although his time in Berkeley with Thomas Flanagan gave him a heightened sense of Ireland as a literary subject (SS 136-138), there is no solace for the poet 'in a nostalgic longing for home' or the 'comforts of religion', as Brandes has written.<sup>23</sup> The poet keeps driving, his mind fixed on his homeland:

Roads unreeled, unreeled  
 Falling light as casts  
 Laid down  
 On shining waters.  
 Under the moon's stigmata

<sup>22</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'Easy Rider', *Atlantis*, November 1971, p. 50; see Rand Brandes and Michael J. Durkan, *Seamus Heaney: A Bibliography, 1959-2003* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), p. 304.

<sup>23</sup> Rand Brandes, 'Seamus Heaney's Working Titles: From "Advancements of Learning" to "The Midnight Anvil"', p. 23.



Six thousand miles away,  
I imagine untroubled dust,  
A loosening gravity,  
Christ weighing by his hands. (WO 80)

These unreeling roads recall 'Night-Drive', conveying once more a trance-like longing for something beyond immediate grasp. The poet is resigned to the fact that his work will take him further still into the politics of the north; it feels like an obligatory job to be completed before setting out to do proper spiritual work. Heaney could say like Donne: 'I am carried towards the West | This day, when my Soules forme bends toward the East'.<sup>24</sup>

In the title poem of *North*, Heaney arrives back to the east, standing on the edge of water for private reflection:

I returned to a long strand,  
the hammered curve of a bay,  
and found only the secular  
powers of the Atlantic thundering. (N 19)

It is possible to locate the poet on the north coast of Ulster because he also faces 'unmagical | invitations of Iceland', and 'the pathetic colonies of Greenland' (N 19). If the impetus of the opening stanzas seems bound up with the prescription of driving in solitude in 'The Peninsula', they are also much less promising: the strand has offered only the 'secular' and 'unmagical', both terms used in a pejorative sense, and Heaney does not seem to be in what he would consider fruitful solitude, but harmful isolation with attendant feelings of dismay and apprehension. Not for the last time in his career, however, a boat will provide him with a curious spiritual notice (see also 'Squarings, viii', ST 62). As he stands at the shoreline, the archaeological finds held in 'Orkney and Dublin' (N 19) are transmuted into 'ocean deafened voices' which warn in tones of 'epiphany', and a 'longship's swimming tongue' an aesthetic and spiritual injunction:

It said, 'Lie down

<sup>24</sup> John Donne, Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward', *The Major Works* edited by John Carey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 214-242, p. 242.

in the word-hoard, burrow  
the coil and gleam  
of your furrowed brain.

Compose in darkness.  
Expect aurora borealis  
in the long foray  
but no cascade of light.

Keep your eye clear  
as the bleb of the icicle,  
trust the feel of what nubbed treasure  
your hands have known. (N 19-20)

Heaney seems to have had one eye set firmly beyond the ‘long foray’) towards the obscure mystical rewards of aurora borealis’, attending to what he later called ‘timeless receptive moments of epiphany’ (PW 49). The ‘unmagical’ seems to have little to do with the vision of the world which he is seeking to evoke. Instead, he is more concerned, as the ‘longship’ seems to know, to express the strangeness and wonder of the cosmos. The ship’s words also indicate that Heaney was susceptible to desires for revelation: ‘a cascade of light’. The imagery of transcendence in later volumes will indeed be characterised by light, which makes its presence felt in *Field Work* and reaches its zenith in *Seeing Things*. Although Terence Brown has pointed out how this kind of early visionary poem seems to be compromised ‘by a tone of reiterative admonition, as if the poet wishes to trust the song but lacks the final assurance of the unselfconscious singer’,<sup>25</sup> ‘North’ nonetheless reveals—in a book otherwise dominated by reverberations from the violence of the times—an impetus towards intellectual and spiritual vision. The longship ultimately challenges Heaney to overcome such self-consciousness by trusting what he has always instinctively felt: urgent need to revitalise and nourish an inner mysticism to bring redundant materialism and political simplifications under the purview of a spiritual gaze.

<sup>25</sup> Terence Brown, ‘The Witnessing Eye and the Speaking Tongue’, *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays* edited by Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), p. 185.

The foremost indication in *North* that Heaney's future primary interests lie beyond the social and political stresses of Northern Ireland can be found in the last poem in the volume, 'Exposure'. This situates the poet in the countryside around his cottage in Wicklow where he dwells on his responsibilities as a writer from the north and, as a consequence, misses the 'once-in-a-lifetime portent, | The comet's pulsing rose' (N 73). Undoubtedly, the poem is laced with political allusions. The title itself might be taken from Wilfred Owen's war poem of the same name; when the poet imagines 'a hero | On some muddy compound' (N 72) and describes himself as 'neither informer or interneer' but an 'inner émigré' (N 72), he crosses an image of Irish political prisoners with one of Osip Mandelstam, interned with other dissenters by Stalin and branded by the regime as an 'internal émigré'.<sup>26</sup> In weighing up his 'responsible tristia' (N 72), he is not only identifying with Mandelstam once more, but also Ovid, who, exiled from Rome, lamented his fate in *Tristia*. Finally, in the last stanza, Heaney completes the historical, literary, and political synthesis with the line 'feeling | Every wind that blows', a direct reference to Yeats's "Meditations in Time of Civil War". Given the sheer number of such allusions, it is perhaps not surprising that many commentators have interpreted the poem in ethical and socio-political terms. For Conor Cruise O'Brien, 'Exposure' gains its strength from Heaney's 'fixed and pre-ordained' relation to the atavism of sectarian violence in Ireland.<sup>27</sup> Seamus Deane, taking a postcolonial standpoint, has said the sense of loss in the poem is created by 'the falseness of the identities which have been forced by politics. This is a moment in Heaney's work in which he defines for himself a moral stance'.<sup>28</sup> Helen Vendler partly echoes these politically informed approaches by pointing out that Heaney's self-

<sup>26</sup> Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope: A Memoir*, trans. Max Hayward (London: Penguin Books, 1975) 205, quoted in Neil Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 81.

<sup>27</sup> Conor Cruise O'Brien, 'A Slow North-east Wind: Review of *North*', *Seamus Heaney: Contemporary Critical Essays* edited by Michael Allen (London: Macmillan Press, 1997), pp. 25-9, p. 34.

<sup>28</sup> Seamus Deane, 'The Timorous and the Bold', *Celtic Revivals* (London, 1985), pp. 176-86, quoted in *Seamus Heaney: Contemporary Critical Essays* edited by Michael Allen (London: Macmillan Press, 1997), p. 71.

portrait as a ‘wood-kerne’ (N 73) and as ‘neither informer or internee’ (N 73) implies a likeness to an Irish soldier driven to the hills by the English army in Edmund Spenser’s *A View of the Present State of Ireland*: Heaney creates, Vendler says, ‘a set of self-delineating figures’ that testify ‘strongly to his need, as he leaves the North, for re-invented metaphors of his own position’.<sup>29</sup> Edna Longley suggests that the poem ‘dramatizes a profound self-searching’: fundamentally, she argues, the poem asks ‘whether departure from Ulster, for which the writing of *North* may be an over-compensation (‘blowing up these sparks’), has precluded some personal or poetic revelation (akin to that of ‘The Tollund Man’ perhaps)’.<sup>30</sup> Longley almost arrives at the ‘revelation’ in the mystical sense of the word, but her reference to ‘The Tollund Man’ suggests that she means that Heaney had missed a better way of reading the contemporary political events. Dwelling on the magnitude of the sociopolitical issues that inform the context for ‘Exposure’, James Simmons shows little tolerance for Heaney’s self-searching which he condemns, somewhat harshly, as vain ‘spiritual hauntings’ and ‘self-pity’, and reads the poem against his own fundamentally sociological concerns (‘Far more than any of Seamus’s dilemma I want the local police to be given a chance to establish law and order’).<sup>31</sup> Neil Corcoran, on the other hand, commends Heaney for the way in which he allows aesthetics to negotiate with politics: ‘If the offered opportunity for action, or for the action of a particular kind of poem, has been ‘missed’, it is nevertheless an honourable position which has been won through to’.<sup>32</sup>

Such approaches certainly shed light on the political references in ‘Exposure’, but some of Heaney’s more perceptive critics have explored the spiritual connotations implicit in

<sup>29</sup> Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 87–89.

<sup>30</sup> Edna Longley, “Inner Émigré or Artful Voyeur?”: Seamus Heaney’s *North* (1975), Michael Allen (ed.) *Seamus Heaney: Contemporary Critical Essays* (London: Basingstoke, 1997), pp. 30–63, p. 58.

<sup>31</sup> James Simmons, ‘The Trouble with Seamus’, *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays* edited by Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 59–60, p. 63.

<sup>32</sup> Neil Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 81.

the poem's imagery. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews has identified among the images of painful exile and isolation a pursuit of 'the kind of imaginative freedom where he feels released from the actual, from the past, from communal responsibility, and can take flight up into the light. He believes he has missed visionary opportunities'.<sup>33</sup> Writing in 1999, Tim Hancock unearthed historical details that strongly support such an interpretation, suggesting that the poem is fuelled by an unsatisfied spiritual thirst. The comet, Hancock suggests, was Kohoutek, discovered in March 1973 and predicted to reach peak visibility in December of that year. Having established that Heaney's comet thus transcends 'historically and politically delineated borders', Hancock argues that it might be a deliberately ambiguous vehicle for spiritual aspirations, coming 'from the heavens', transcending political borders, and providing 'evidence of an alternative dimension that is still, to a great extent, beyond human understanding and comprehension'.<sup>34</sup> Hancock also discerns in 'Exposure' two voices which create a distinction between the character in the poem and the man who writes about him. The latter's impatience with the former's 'qualms and handwringings' (as Ian Hamilton has put it) makes the poem 'as much critique [...] of sociopolitical conscience' as the expression of it. When the writer describes himself as 'grown long-haired and thoughtful' he gains a tell-tale etymological identifier: 'long-haired', the Hancock reminds us, is the Greek word for 'comet', and he concludes that this is a poet whose 'new identity is being formed by thoughts of transcendence rather than events on the ground'. 'Exposure', then, could indeed be regarded as much as a 'farewell to *tristia* as *tristia* itself'.<sup>35</sup>

This reading of 'Exposure' as a poem of two voices, moreover, suggests striking parallels to the kind of double narrative focus in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Dante's narrative is

<sup>33</sup>Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, 'The Spirit's Protest', *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays* edited by Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 215-216.

<sup>34</sup>Tim Hancock, 'Seamus Heaney: Poet of Tension or Conviction?' *Irish University Review*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Autumn – Winter, 1999), pp. 367-368, p. 368.

<sup>35</sup>Tim Hancock, 'Seamus Heaney: Poet of Tension or Conviction?', pp. 368-369.

immediately split between the diachronic, the time-bound, in which the pilgrim is confronted by a number of encounters which he cannot understand, and the synoptic, omniscient perspective of the poet who has seen it all before.<sup>36</sup> In the first stanza of Canto I the *Inferno*, Dante the pilgrim finds himself ‘obscured in a great forest’: ‘I knew I had lost the way’.<sup>37</sup> By the third stanza of Canto I, Dante the poet introduces his omniscient voice: ‘Yet there was good there, and to make clear | I will speak of other things that I perceived’.<sup>38</sup> The ironic distance between Dante the pilgrim and Dante the poet may offer a precursor to that between the political Heaney, who wrestles with ethical dilemmas in the diachronic, and Heaney the poet, who narrates from a less involved, more knowing perspective (similar to that which will later be offered by Joyce in ‘Station Island’). Each poet introduces a detachment that the troubled character has yet to attain. Dante’s pilgrim does yet not know that a ‘little spark brings a great flame after it’, the beatific light of Paradise;<sup>39</sup> Heaney’s man of sociopolitical conscience does not know that the sparks struck by his move south will—once he focuses on an alternative stimulus of poetry, symbolised by the obscure and transcendent ‘comet’s pulsing rose’ (*N 73*) – grant him access to ‘a door into the light’.<sup>40</sup>

‘Exposure’, then, might be read as a transitional poem deliberately placed at the end of *North* whereby Heaney gestures ahead to what he will come to regard as the proper focus of his art, signalling a new beginning in his spiritual journey. As John Wilson Foster has pointed out, by 1998, when the poet had published nine of his twelve major volumes, Heaney’s had transformed into something resembling ‘Dante’s rational mysticism rendered

<sup>36</sup> See Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Reading Dante* (Yale University Press, 2014).

<sup>37</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Inferno* I. 2-3, *The Divine Comedy* trans. C.H. Sisson, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 47.

<sup>38</sup> *Inferno* I. 8-9.

<sup>39</sup> *Paradiso* I. 34.

<sup>40</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in James Randall, ‘Interview with Seamus Heaney’, *Ploughshares* 5, Fall. Issue 18 (1979, rep. 2011), pp. 173-188, p. 182.

in contemporary terms': 'This is the spiritual narrative, the fiction, the mythography of his output to date'.<sup>41</sup> In *North*, he does indeed depict his poetic self, like Dante, as being on the wrong path and having 'lost the way'. In the four books that will follow, he seeks to describe, through the exploration of various sources of mystical wisdom, spiritual examination, and approaches to the transcendent, 'the soul's unity of being' (ibid).

<sup>41</sup> John Wilson Foster, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 57.

#### 4. 'Somewhere, well out, beyond...': *Field Work* and the Romantic Transcendent

When, in 1998, Faber and Faber published Heaney's *Opened Ground: Poems, 1966-1996*, Neil Corcoran wrote a companion study of the major individual volumes in the book and concluded that the poems collected in *Field Work* 'held tensely in [...] balance the song of possible reconciliation and the memorial lament'.<sup>1</sup> Any glimmers of light in *Field Work*, Corcoran said, are 'darkened frequently by shadows of the old conflict' (ibid., 87). Corcoran was reiterating, and contributing to, an enduring idea that Heaney's main artistic objective was 'to resolve the tension between his sense of an historical situation and the demands of his own imagination'.<sup>2</sup> Ten years after Corcoran's study was published, *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney* sustained this view: in its introduction, Bernard O'Donoghue wrote that 'the wish that *Field Work* in 1979 should mark the starting point of [...] new freedom was [...] doomed'.<sup>3</sup> For O'Donoghue, the poems that attempt a new beginning are 'outweighed by the public poems' (ibid), while Rand Brandes, in the first essay in that study, similarly describes the poet's fifth major volume as a case in which private artistic 'hope' is closely shadowed by 'the state of affairs in Northern Ireland'.<sup>4</sup>

This consensus may be in part a product of hindsight, given the continuing influence of socio-political pressures in Heaney's next book, *Station Island*, but some critics have paid closer attention to an enhanced interest in a transcendental reality in *Field Work*—one that Heaney gestured to in a private letter to Brian Friel in which he states his intention to search

<sup>1</sup> Neil Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 109.

<sup>2</sup> Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, 'Introduction', *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays* edited by Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 1-18, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Introduction', *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, edited by B. O'Donoghue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Rand Brandes, 'Seamus Heaney's Working Titles: From "Advancements of Learning" to "The Midnight Anvil"', p. 25.



for ‘a door into the light’ in this volume.<sup>5</sup> In *London Review of Books*, Christopher Ricks contributed a suggestive review of *Field Work* in which he broaches, albeit briefly, the theme of enlightenment. Opting to read the volume in contrast to *North*, Ricks suggests that each book demonstrates different kinds of ‘enlightened’ thought:

*North*, by bending itself to deep excavations within the past of Ireland and elsewhere, achieved a racked dignity in the face of horrors. The poems were truly enlightened. But *Field Work* shows, more variously and with high composure, that there is something more primary than enlightenment.<sup>6</sup>

In the context of the political ‘horrors’ addressed by *North*, ‘enlightened’ and ‘enlightenment’ seem to be used in connection with rational thought and objectivity (perhaps Ricks was also thinking of the triumph of the intellect in the mythical ‘Hercules and Antaeus’). Ricks suggests that there is something ‘more primary’ than that kind of enlightenment: it is not a Kantian daring to know—the courage to trust your own understanding—which he found in the poems of *Field Work*, but a more obscure source of spiritual illumination. It is to this kind of conception of an enigmatic, transcendental dimension underpinning the world of phenomena as they are perceived that Heaney alluded when, in 1977, he described the Irish landscape as containing ‘a system of reality beyond the visible realities’ (*P* 132). In *Field Work*, the attendant subjective idealism of ‘a marvellous or a magical view of the world’ (*P* 133) helps generate what often seems like an almost magnetic energy which pulls Heaney’s imagination towards the idea of a transcendent reality that exists through and beyond the geographical places—and indeed through and beyond physical people—in the poems.

<sup>5</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in James Randall, p. 182.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Ricks, ‘The Mouth, the Meal and the Book: Review of *Field Work*’, *Seamus Heaney: Contemporary Critical Essays* edited by Michael Allen (London: Macmillan Press, 1997), p. 97.

In *Passage to the Centre*, Daniel Tobin focuses on this alternative dimension that lies, albeit often unobtrusively, at the heart of Heaney's interests in *Field Work*, albeit obscured by the public poems and those that gesture to the 'state of affairs in Northern Ireland'. Tobin adapts Heaney's spatial metaphor of 'the door into the light' in order to argue that the poet steps away from the tragedy of *North* and moves into a new period of spiritual resolution: 'in *Field Work*, Heaney's quest for self-definition becomes a less allusive enquiry into origins than a public affirmation of the poet's resiliency in the face of historical and political circumstance'.<sup>7</sup> For Tobin, such acts of resilience involve 'newfound hope' which '[envision] art as a mode of thinking that discerns the transcendent' (ibid). In keeping with his thesis Tobin places perhaps too much emphasis on the metaphor of the centre, but he is generally right to posit the search for transcendence at the heart of the book. The main ambition of the poet of *Field Work* may not be to resolve the historical situation and the demands of his own imagination, but rather to find an imagery that adequately conveys his own imaginative urge to go beyond. The primary imaginative effort in the book is not so much to identify that which might transcend inner conflict as to capture the transcendent impulse itself.

This artistic ambition, of course, sounds distinctly Romantic. Critics have been attentive to the major influence of Wordsworth on Heaney's transcendental images in *Field Work*. In the years leading up to the book's publication, Heaney wrote and presented a documentary entitled *William Wordsworth Lived Here*. It was his first visit to Dove Cottage at Grasmere and it seems to have had a profound effect on his imagination: Michael Kinsella has shown a chronological link between the documentary and 'Feelings into Words' (an essay which begins with quotations from *The Prelude*) and convincingly argues that the experience of Grasmere allowed the poet to transform his own new cottage at Glanmore into 'a poetic haven and through that most Wordsworthian of faculties, the imagination, see the

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Tobin, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 143.

marvellous in the ordinary and stand with the Romantic poet, “at the brink of wonder”<sup>8</sup>. Hugh Haughton has similarly drawn attention to the influence that Wordsworth had on Heaney’s work, arguing that *Field Work*, the ‘Glanmore Sonnets’ in particular, mirrors *The Prelude*’s ‘fundamental story of “Imagination, How Impaired and Restored”’: for Haughton, Heaney, like middle-period Wordsworth, is ‘a Romantic ontologist, a Heideggerian poet of being and of home’.<sup>9</sup> From these readings of Wordsworth’s influence on Heaney there emerge three important insights: the poet’s trip to Grasmere helped him transfigure Glanmore; *The Prelude* became fundamental to his poetic imagination at this time; and in this literary influence there exists an attendant cognizance of a transcendentalist framework. Heaney once claimed that, at the time of the *Field Work* poems, he was writing out of the desire to ‘fortify the quotidian into a work’,<sup>10</sup> but the readings above show how such an account may oversimplify things: his effort in seeking out the transcendental from the vantage point of his new domestic reality—attempting to commune, as he said of Wordsworth, with an indeterminate reality which lies beyond quotidian realities<sup>11</sup>—better characterises the spirit of the book.

Counteracting the previous emphasis on sociopolitical tensions, this chapter reconsiders the romantic and transcendent imagery of *Field Work*. Examination of two public poems in the first part of the book, ‘Oysters’ and ‘Casualty’, shows a clear movement towards an Epicurean detachment to explore private concerns and, in the case of the latter, Wordsworthian aspirations, which in turn marks out the way for the book’s subsequent

<sup>8</sup> Michael Kinsella, ‘Coda’, *Poet to Poet: Seamus Heaney’s Wordsworth* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of York, 2003), p. 213.

<sup>9</sup> Hugh Haughton, ‘Power and Hiding Places: Wordsworth and Seamus Heaney’, *The Monstrous Debt: Modalities of Romantic Influence in Twentieth Century Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State, 2006), pp. 61-101, p. 94.

<sup>10</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in Frank Kinahan, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> Seamus Heaney, ‘The Triumph of Spirit’, *The Guardian*, Saturday 11 February 2006 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/feb/11/poetry.classics>> [accessed September 2017]

transcendent contemplations. ‘Glanmore Sonnets’, the book’s central sequence of poems, are scrutinized from a perspective which distinguishes the poet’s anticipation and conceptualisation of enlightenment as refracted through Wordsworthian imagery. Attention to the volume’s marriage poems—in particular ‘The Skunk’, ‘The Otter’ and the volume’s title sequence—reveals the way in which uxorious eroticism is closely related to the poet’s quest for something beyond ordinary understanding but somehow within physical reach.

#### **4.1. Escaping History: ‘Oysters’ and ‘Casualty’**

In ‘Oysters’, the opening poem of the volume, Heaney reintroduces the tension which he explored through the device of two voices in ‘Exposure’—the relationship between socio-political considerations, which require, or rather stimulate, a self-questioning regarding one’s ethical responsibilities, and the inner demands for a spiritual life and the access to attendant metaphysical truths, which might transcend all such external contingencies:

Over the Alps, packed deep in hay and snow,  
The Romans hauled their oysters south to Rome:  
I saw damp panniers disgorge  
The frond-lipped, brine-stung  
Glut of privilege

And was angry that my trust could not repose  
In the clear light, like poetry or freedom  
Leaning in from the sea. I ate the day  
Deliberately, that its tang  
Might quicken me all into verb, pure verb. (*FW* 11)

Heaney sets up at opposite poles colonial imperialism and ‘the clear light, like poetry or freedom | Leaning in from the sea’, but any tension that exists between these two is finally dispelled by an overtly affirmative mood regarding the latter. In the closing stanza, the series of associations (‘clear light’, ‘poetry’, ‘freedom’, ‘pure verb’) creates an image of idealistic possibility which, in turn, permits the reader to draw a connection to ‘Hercules and Antaeus’. The emphasis on light and ‘freedom’ in the final stanza reiterates his bias towards Hercules, whose intellectual capacity he described as ‘a spur of light’ (*N* 23) which defeats the earth-

bound, ‘moulder-hugger’ Antaeus (*N* 23). The ‘clear light’ also anticipates the poet’s essay on Philip Larkin, ‘The Main of Light’. For Heaney, Larkin’s pessimism was often countered by ‘the Romantic poet in himself who must respond with pleasure and alacrity, exclaiming, as it were, “Already with thee!”’ (*GT* 20). Such alacrity, Heaney writes, manifests in an imagery of light which reveals ‘a repining for a more crystalline reality to which he might give allegiance’: *Sad Steps*, he argues, betrays a temptation to believe in the ‘moment of lunar glamour’ (*GT* 16); *Solar*, he continues, is ‘a prayer, a hymn to the sun, a generosity that is in no way attenuated’ (*GT* 17). Without embarrassment to the sceptical man, Heaney concluded, Larkin could—despite his cynicism—shift his gaze towards ‘the spiritual’ and ‘Platonic’ (*GT* 21), conjuring this dimension with a revelatory glow. But if Larkin was inclined to suppress or disparage his own Romantic impulses. In *Oysters*, Heaney openly displays a mood of *carpe diem* as he seeks access to, and aesthetic conceptualisation of, ‘a realm beyond the social and historical’ (*GT* 19).

The abstract dichotomy between the constrictions of history and the freedoms afforded by art and the intellect is particularised in ‘Casualty’, Heaney’s elegy for Louis O’Neill. The arresting ‘political’ imagery here is counterbalanced by emphasis on individualization, and the more elusive imagery of transcendence towards the end of the poem demonstrates the change of focus. The poem revisits the aftermath of Bloody Sunday on 30 January 1972 when the British army ‘shot dead | The thirteen men in Derry’ (*FW* 22), and it sets in parallel the ‘common funeral’ (*FW* 22) of those men on 2 February and the death of O’Neill, who was killed by a bomb later that day. The trimetric form in which Heaney paints his picture of O’Neill is based specifically on Yeats’s ‘The Fisherman’,<sup>12</sup> a poem where Yeats imagines, against the background of contemporary Ireland, a man who will embody the moral spirit of his ‘own race’. Perhaps the most notable characteristic of

<sup>12</sup> In *Stepping Stones*, Heaney says that he deliberately counted out the metre of ‘The Fisherman’ (*SS* 194).

Yeats's fisherman is that he is fictional: 'A man who does not exist, | A man who is but a dream'.<sup>13</sup> Helen Vendler has rightly argued that this imagery of 'unlettered fisherman' belongs to 'the ultimate aristocracy—that of Platonic Forms, those [...] unattainable "Presences"'.<sup>14</sup> The crucial difference between Yeats's Platonic form and Heaney's version of Louis O'Neill would thus seem to be that the latter did exist in our Aristotelian world, but it is still proper that Heaney echoed the form of the earlier poem: O'Neill may have been a real, historical person with a date of birth and death, but it could be said that he did not exist as a meaningful entity according to the exacting criteria of nationalism during the Troubles: he eludes the grip of, and refuses to fall in line with, tribal ideology, and in so doing becomes the ghost of pure being that haunts the domain of competing ideologies:

Dawn-sniffing revenant,  
Plodder through midnight rain,  
Question me again. (*FW* 24)

This appears to beg the question of whether Louis O'Neill's status of exemplary individuality extends beyond escaping, like Yeats, the contemporary political circumstances of Ireland, and the third section of the poem offers one of the strongest clues that Heaney now wants to pursue more private concerns. The collective pronouns of part II ('we were braced and bound', 'our tribe's complicity') change to the first person ('I missed his funeral', 'I tasted freedom'), as the speaker forgoes 'respectable'—used in a pejorative sense that seems to channel the playful disobedience of O'Neill—mourning procedures of the 'common funeral': O'Neill 'would not be held | At home by his own crowd' (*FW* 22), and Heaney honours such individualism by the subtle act of defiance in remaining absent from the ritualistic legalisms of those 'quiet walkers | And sideways talkers'.

<sup>13</sup> W.B. Yeats, 'The Fisherman', *Collected Poems*, pp. 166-167, p. 167.

<sup>14</sup> Helen Vendler, 'The Nationalist Measure', *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form* (Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 191.

If this might still seem involved in the effort to repudiate, and escape from, the demands of the historical moment of the Troubles, the memory of a shared boat journey takes us out towards very different aesthetic territory. The stanza seems to begin in the vein of a Yeatsian celebration of the ‘wise and simple’ rural labourer:

I was taken in his boat,  
The screw purling, turning  
Indolent fathoms white,  
I tasted freedom with him.  
To get out early, haul  
Steadily off the bottom,  
Dispraise the catch, and smile  
As you find a rhythm  
Working you, slow mile by mile,  
Into your proper haunt  
Somewhere, well out, beyond... (FW 24)

But the ellipses suggest that the destination here may be a little more mysterious than Irish fishing grounds. In fact, the imagery and atmosphere of this stanza recalls Wordsworth more than Yeats, specifically the famous stolen-boat episode in the *Prelude*. In that section of his poem, Wordsworth describes the thrill when, as a young boy, he committed the ‘act of stealth | And troubled pleasure’:

Small circles glittering idly in the moon,  
Until they melted all into one track  
Of sparkling light. But now, like one who rows,  
Proud of his skill, to reach a chosen point  
With an unswerving line, I fixed my view  
Upon the summit of a craggy ridge,  
The horizon's utmost boundary; far above  
Was nothing but the stars and the grey sky.<sup>15</sup>

Here is one of Wordsworth’s more celebrated ‘spots of time’,<sup>16</sup> and when Heaney relates the experience of his fishing trip with O’Neill it seems to have a similarly restorative effect. The rhythm of the boat becomes a potent metaphor for the rhythm and effect of poetry as Heaney

<sup>15</sup> William Wordsworth, ‘Childhood and School-Time’, *The Prelude, or Growth of a Poet’s Mind: An Autobiographical poem* (London: Edward Moxon, 1850), p. 18.

<sup>16</sup> William Wordsworth, ‘Imagination and Taste, How and Repaired’, p. 326.

seems to initiate an exploratory journey by which he might satisfy his growing impulse to seek out wider horizons and perspectives. The combination of the last word of Heaney's stanza ('beyond') with the ellipses draws attention to his willingness to dwell, in a distinctly Wordsworthian fashion, on tentative intimations of what he will call in the next part of *Field Work* 'Sensings, mountings from the hiding places' (FW 34). The boat trip, with its tantalizingly obscure destination, then resonates in Heaney's imagination just as one had done in Wordsworth's:

but after I had seen  
That spectacle, for many days, my brain  
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense  
Of unknown modes of being; o'er my thoughts  
There hung a darkness, call it solitude  
Or blank desertion.<sup>17</sup>

Like Wordsworth, Heaney is stimulated by intimations of a transcendent dimension—'a system of reality' beyond the senses (*P* 132)—in which he feels he has glimpsed his 'proper haunt', his natural poetic home. In the 'Glanmore Sonnets'—a sequence written after Heaney had literally relocated to a new home—this elusive reality becomes central to his intuition, to use Kant's terms, of the phenomenal world as it appears to him in space and time.

#### 4.2. 'Mysteries': The Glanmore Sonnets

*Field Work*'s central sequence, 'Glanmore Sonnets', brings us back to the geographical place where Heaney's 'inner émigré' had wandered through 'the spent flukes of autumn', looking for, and agonizingly missing, 'the comet's pulsing rose' (*N* 72-73). But whereas that earlier December scene evoked a sense of spiritual waste, the winter imagery of the Glanmore sequence seems to reflect an inner sense of opportunity and what he would call, in another context, 'metaphorical possibilities':<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Childhood and School-Time', p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in Melvyn Bragg, *The South Bank Show*, Season 15, Ep. 6, London Weekend Television, 27 October 1991.



Opened ground: vowels ploughed into other.  
The mildest February for twenty years  
Is mist bands over furrows, a deep no sound  
Vulnerable to distant gargling tractors. (FW 33)

It could be said this ‘deep no sound’ recalls the transcendental silence of the mystics, as Daniel Tobin has pointed out.<sup>19</sup> It could also be said that it derives from Heaney’s sense of Dove Cottage as a place of ‘active quiet’ (P 68). Either way, it is something which had never before been given such prominence in Heaney’s soundscapes, and it appears to have itself silenced the sociopolitical noise of the Troubles and the Northern literary cognoscenti who had opposed the mythical dimension of his work. These opening lines also have a thinly veiled reference to one of his early appearances in print. Under the name ‘Seamus J. Heaney’ in 1962, he submitted a poem entitled ‘Tractors’ to *The Belfast Telegraph* in which the narrator speaks of tractors ‘In winter’ that ‘gargle | Sadly, astraddle unfolding furrows’.<sup>20</sup> This offers an added sense of artistic and spiritual chronology to the poem when the speaker suggests that ‘Now the good life could be to cross a field | And art a paradigm of earth new from the lathe’ (FW 33). The stress on ‘Now’ and ‘new’ help prolong the mood of impending development, and as the sonnet progresses Heaney’s ‘art’ appears less like, or likely to *become*, ‘a paradigm of earth’—perhaps it could have been more suitably described that way in the beginning with the sensuous aesthetics of *Death of a Naturalist*—than a linguistic vehicle for transcendent impulses and a Romantic vision of the material world. Perhaps the most striking evidence of Heaney’s consciousness of a metaphysical backdrop to phenomena is in the way in which this sonnet introduces a new mode of rose symbolism: ‘I am quickened’, the speaker says, ‘with a redolence | Of the fundamental dark unblown rose’ (FW 33). While in ‘Exposure’ there was a squandered chance of imaginatively capturing, and being stimulated by, ‘the comet’s pulsing rose’, now there is a stated apprehension of an

<sup>19</sup> Daniel Tobin, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 147.

<sup>20</sup> Seamus Heaney, ‘Tractors’, *The Belfast Telegraph*, Saturday 24 November 1962, p. 5.

equally mysterious, equally symbolic rose—not shooting among heavenly bodies but deeply rooted in the earth’s soil—which is openly associated with feelings of unimpeded excitement and anticipation. Heaney’s rose seems closely related to what he called, in 1974, the symbolist image which allows for ‘the unburdening of the indefinable through pangs that are indescribable, where the poem survives as the hieroglyph of a numinous activity’ (*P* 83). In the later editions of *Field Work*, the lines appear in altered form: the speaker is quickened, he says, ‘with a redolence | Of farmland as a dark unblown rose’.<sup>21</sup> This might satisfy the materialist’s thesis that a rose is simply a rose—or Louis MacNeice’s conviction that when a rose hits us in the senses, it is the rose that hits us and not some value separable from the rose<sup>22</sup>—but the portentous succession of adjectives in the original version of the poem more accurately reflects his earlier feeling of being ‘quickened’ by the indescribable sense of a ‘numinous’ value fundamental to the diversity of living forms. ‘A rose is a rose is a rose,’ as he said in reference to Blake’s symbolist poem, ‘The Sick Rose’, ‘but not when it’s sick’ (*P* 83), nor indeed when it is ‘fundamental dark unblown’.

In Poem II, the speaker also seems to be ‘quickened’ by the possibility that the rhythms and imagery of poetry can translate this subjective sense of the transcendent qualities embedded in phenomena:

Sensings, mountings from the hiding places,  
 Words entering almost the sense of touch  
 Ferreting themselves out of their dark hutch—  
 ‘These things are not secrets but mysteries,’  
 Oisín Kelly told me years ago  
 In Belfast, hankering after stone  
 That connived with the chisel, as if the grain  
 Remembered what the mallet tapped to know. (*FW* 34)

<sup>21</sup> Seamus Heaney, ‘Glanmore Sonnets, I’, *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p.163.

<sup>22</sup> Louis MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, p. 15.

The first line evokes Wordsworth's *Prelude*: 'The hiding places of my power | Seem open; I approach, and then they close'.<sup>23</sup> In 1974, Heaney said that these lines expressed his sense of poetry as 'divination', 'revelation of the self to the self', 'restoration of the culture to itself', and 'archaeological finds' (*P* 41). Yet that earlier self-assessment—or at least its associations with the self being bound up with a Northern collective unconscious—seems too restrictive for the Romantic sense here of an individual's desire for direct experience of 'mysteries'. Indeed, there is a much more elusive impulse at work in the narrative than the cultural 'divination' or archaeology that dominated much of Heaney's first four volumes. Here the image of the solitary sculptor 'hankering after stone' has metaphorical connotations which reflect the ambitions of a poet working to reorient himself in new aesthetic territory. The sense of artistic mission in the sculptor imagery, moreover, is encompassed and augmented by the sonnet's final couplet which draws upon Heaney's view of Wordsworth composing poetry 'to-ing and fro-ing like a ploughman up and down a field' (*P* 65): 'Vowels ploughed into other, opened ground, | Each verse returning like the plough turned round' (*FW* 34). This is also a repetition of the metaphor in the first poem in the sequence ('Vowels ploughed into other: opened ground'), but changed punctuation arouses a sense of moving up a gear in his progress, and gives us a strong indication that the excited and anticipatory mood is the result of, and perhaps revolves 'round', Heaney's concern with conveying his decidedly Wordsworthian impulse to probe for the metaphysical via physical realities.

Yet if this implies an approach to such realms of experience which Heaney would identify as 'a mind projecting its own force' (*GT* 5), the imaginative impulse which seems to underpin the Glanmore sequence may better be seen as intimately bound up with the poet's identification with the *receptive* temperament often displayed by Wordsworth. In 1978, Heaney described his sense of poetry as a 'discovery of lines and the intuitive extension of

<sup>23</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Imagination and Taste, How and Repaired', p. 327.

the vital element in those lines over a whole passage' (*P* 61), illustrating his point by comparing the responsive Wordsworth to the highhanded Yeats:

If he surrenders to it, allows himself to be carried by its invitations, then we will have a music not unlike Wordsworth's hypnotic, swimming with the current of its form rather than against it. If, on the other hand, instead of surrendering to the drift of the original generating rhythm, the poet seeks to discipline it, to harness its energies in order to drive other parts of his mind into motion, then we will have a music not unlike Yeats's, affirmative, seeking to master the ear, swimming strongly against the current of its form. (*P* 61-62)

The tone here invites us to believe that Heaney identifies with the English rather than the Irish poet, the implication of which seems especially pertinent to an interpretation of Poem V where the opening lines might otherwise constitute an unequivocally literal image:

I used to lie with an ear to the line  
For that way, they said, there should come a sound  
Escaping ahead (*FW* 36)

The way in which the train itself remains absent from the picture creates the thrilling anticipation of something beyond the horizon, which seems less like Yeats's impulse to control and forge than Wordsworth's impulse to surrender and linger in suspense over the incipient mystery. The penultimate connection between the vanishing ripples of water and the stirring conjunction of memory and writing ('As they are shaking now across my heart') also lends to the sense that this is a Wordsworthian 'intuitive extension' of a transcendent impulse.

A similar sense of anticipation animates Poem VI, the beginning of which introduces an anonymous 'He' who lived among 'unsayable lights' (*FW* 38). Such light takes us back to Larkin's imagery of the transcendent, but if it is incommunicable, the speaker subsequently attempts to convey aspects of the somewhat Romantic environment which can be described:

‘the fuchsia in a drizzling noon’, ‘an elderflower at dusk’, and ‘green fields greying on the windswept heights’ (*FW* 38). This seems to be conducive to a heightened awareness in the unidentified artist, given the direct quotation of their cryptic declaration of intention that follows: “‘I will break through,” he said, “what I have glazed over | With perfect mist and peaceful absences...”” (*FW* 38). Evidence that this speaker is Heaney declaring new artistic ambitions—the desire to ‘break through’ to a spiritualized vision of phenomena—can be found in the way in which the poem proceeds to dwell on a symbolic winter image which is framed as a childhood memory of Derry when the poet would have been approximately eight years old:

Sudden and sure as the man who dared the ice  
 And raced his bike across the Moyola River.  
 A man we never saw. But in that winter  
 Of nineteen forty-seven, when the snow  
 Kept the country bright as a studio,  
 In a cold where things might crystallize or founder,  
 His story quickened us, a wild white goose  
 Heard after dark above the drifted house. (*FW* 38)

This combination of the winter cold and the daredevil crossing over the frozen river is strikingly similar to Wordsworth’s childhood memory of ‘the frosty season, when the sun | Was set’:

It was a time of rapture! Clear and cloud  
 The village clock tolled six, –I wheeled about,  
 Proud and exulting like an untired horse  
 That cares not for his home. All shod with steel,  
 We hissed along the polished ice in games  
 Confederate, imitative of the chase  
 And woodland pleasure, –the resounding horn,  
 The pack loud chiming, and the hunted hare.<sup>24</sup>

Wordsworth describes here an ecstatic experience from childhood which offers him a model of rhythm, excitement, and sense of freedom later to be pursued in poetry. Heaney associates this kind of freedom with the racing speed and psychological daring of the man who crosses

<sup>24</sup> William Wordsworth, ‘Childhood and School-Time’, p. 21.

the Moyola, and the ‘wild white goose’ evokes, like Wordsworth’s ‘hunted hare’, something of the elusive nature and mystery of what he is seeking. It could be said that the two images of Heaney’s sonnet are fitted neatly together in order to educe in the reader an attitude consistent with the poet’s own sense of an elusive spiritual dimension beyond quotidian experience, one that is waiting to be penetrated. There may be no material evidence to support the existence of such a transcendent dimension, it seems to suggest, and its poetic conceptualisation, by definition, may border on the impossible, but dwelling on it nonetheless supplies a ‘quickenings’ power. The elusiveness of such transcendent symbols is indicative of the deeply Romantic tendencies of Heaney’s imagination in this book: the ‘man we never saw’ is entirely legend, while ‘the wild white goose’ hints that the poet knowingly pursues the uncatchable.

Conversely, it might be felt that an animating spiritual dimension in the material world manages to unexpectedly ‘break through’ to actuality in Poem VII. The speaker begins by listing names in what initially seems like an echo of earlier place-name poems: ‘Dogger, Rockall, Malin, Irish Sea’ (*FW* 39). In ‘Feelings into Words’ in 1974, Heaney suggested that, in his childhood, these particular words were ‘bearers of history and mystery’, a feeling which was stimulated by ‘the beautiful sprung rhythms’ of the imaginative impact of the names: ‘Green, swift upsurges, North Atlantic flux | Conjured by that strong gale-warning voice’ (*FW* 39). Mystery is more important than history in this poem. The ‘sprung rhythms’ conjure Hopkins’s ‘Heaven-Haven’ in which ‘the green swell is in the havens dumb’,<sup>25</sup> and the adaptation of that poem’s central metaphor adds to the sense of a thrilling and dangerous dimension beyond the speaker, one that is brought home to the poet when he sees the boats at Wicklow:

Midnight and closedown. Sirens of the tundra,

<sup>25</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, ‘Heaven-Haven’, *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins* edited by Norman H. MacKenzie, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 29-30.

Of eel-road, seal-road, keel-road, whale-road, raise  
Their wind-compounded keen behind the baize  
And drive the trawlers to the lee of Wicklow.  
*L'Etoile, Le Guillemot, La Belle Hélène*  
Nursed their bright names this morning in the bay  
That toiled like mortar. (FW 39)

Platonic Forms have been made manifest. The phrases have been translated, to recast

Heaney's formulation, 'into a nervous apprehension of phenomena' (P 84), the boats glowing with a numinous aura which seems to be the result of their having arrived from what the poet called 'Somewhere, well out, beyond...' (FW 24). The attendant mood is one of joyous discovery and serendipity:

It was marvellous  
And actual, I said out loud, 'A haven,'  
The word deepening, clearing, like the sky  
Elsewhere on Minches, Cromarty, The Faroes. (FW 39)

In averring that the 'marvellous' has been accommodated in the 'actual' world, Heaney anticipates potential future instances in which the metaphysical appears to be reconciled with the physical. The verbs 'deepening' and 'clearing' indicate, moreover, that he has experienced imaginative consolidation and illumination whereby mysterious energies hitherto beyond reach have been housed and domesticated.

#### **4.3. 'You were beyond me': Spiritualizing Marriage**

In the third part of *Field Work*, Heaney's wife Marie acquires something of the 'marvellous' and 'actual' qualities conjoined in Poem VII of the 'Glanmore Sonnets'. Marie makes brief appearances in the sequence of course, for example in the third sonnet, where Heaney is enjoying an evening when 'the cuckoo and the corncrake | (So much, too much) consorted at twilight'. The poet writes:

I had said earlier, 'I won't relapse  
From this strange loneliness I've brought us to.  
Dorothy and William—' She interrupts:  
'You're not going to compare us two...?' (FW 35)

Different relationships notwithstanding, Marie's protest makes her even *more* like Wordsworth's sister: she has made what Heaney would later describe as 'Dorothy's typically swift, alert, on-the-spot annotation' of their experience.<sup>26</sup> The demurral, then, only throws into sharp relief the poet's Romantic tendencies to seek through his connubial life a mythic and oneiric world (ibid). At the conclusion of the Glanmore sequence, Marie is pictured in the ethereal realm of a dream within a dream ('in that dream I dreamt') where Heaney imagines the two of them asleep in a bog as 'breathing effigies' (FW 42):

When you came with your deliberate kiss  
To raise us towards the lovely and painful  
Covenants of flesh; our separateness;  
The respite in our dewy dreaming faces. (FW 42)

This evokes Genesis where God forms various 'covenants' with His people, perhaps giving the sexual imagery what Walter Pater, thinking of Wordsworth, called 'an almost biblical depth'.<sup>27</sup> Heaney's language spiritualizes his sexual union; Marie becomes an Irish Blessed Damozel, a means towards the end of holy respite. 'Maybe eros is the sine qua non', he told Denis O'Driscoll in their discussion of *Field Work* (SS 205). Indeed, the poet explores in the marriage poems in the book this connection between eros and the transfiguring imagination as a mode of transcendence.

When, in 'The Otter', Marie plunges into the pool during a holiday in Tuscany, the observing poet looks and sounds like the epitome of desirous concentration:

I loved your wet head and smashing crawl,  
Your fine swimmer's back and shoulders  
Surfacing and surfacing again  
This year and every year since.

I sat dry-throated on the warm stones.  
You were beyond me.  
The mellowed clarities, the grape-deep air  
Thinned and disappointed. (FW 47)

<sup>26</sup> Seamus Heaney, "'Apt Admonishment": Wordsworth as an Example', p. 26.

<sup>27</sup> Walter Pater, 'Wordsworth', *Appreciations* (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 37-63, p. 52.



Dwelling, with this kind of Keatsian sensuality, on the domestic environment and the female body, Heaney establishes physical and sexual realism, but it could be said that the uxorious observer opens his senses to something more mysterious when he adopts a zoomorphic view of the coveted swimmer 'beyond' him:

My two hands are plumbed water.  
You are my palpable, lithe  
Otter of memory  
In the pool of the moment (FW 47)

Here Heaney's wife is more than just ordinary flesh and blood. The marvellous, like the shipping broadcasts that become incarnate in the seventh Glanmore sonnet, has been actualized as something 'palpable' which the speaker is apparently now able to 'hold'. While this 'moment' of transformation from the physical to the magical could be said to be written in the tradition of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the aquatic imagery and seven stanza structure of the poem perhaps more readily suggests intertextual links with Donne's 'The Bait'. In his poem, Donne incorporates his sense of the transcendent as rooted in the paradox that God is the highest possible spiritual entity which manifests in the flesh of his desired partner:

By sun, or moon, thou darkenst both,  
And if myself have leave to see,  
I need not their light, having thee.<sup>28</sup>

Donne's zoomorphism concludes with spellbound defeat: 'That fish, that is not caught thereby, | Alas, is far wiser than I' (ibid). Heaney's speaker, like Donne's, amorously watches the metamorphosed body eluding their grip:

And suddenly you're out,  
Back again, intent as ever,  
Heavy and frisky in your freshened pelt  
Printing the stones (FW 47)

<sup>28</sup> John Donne, 'The Bait', *The Major Works* edited by John Carey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 118.

The playful and lusty tone of the poem, combined with Keatsian sensuality and the overarching Donnean structure and imagery, concludes with the transcendent withdrawing from view: the elusive otter leaves only traces of itself in footprints over the stones.

A similar ‘moment’ of physical transformation can also be discerned in ‘The Skunk’, where Heaney draws upon the experience of time spent apart from his wife while he was living and working in California. The poem begins with a report of a skunk apparently witnessed by the poet on a nightly basis at his North Berkeley home:

Up, black, striped and damasked like the chasuble  
At a funeral mass, the skunk’s tail  
Paraded the skunk. Night after night  
I expected her like a visitor. (FW 48)

Given the presence and influence of Robert Lowell elsewhere in *Field Work* (‘Elegy’, ‘September Song’), this ‘visitor’ evokes comparisons to the American’s ‘mother skunk’ who ‘with her column of kittens swills the garbage pail’ in the poem ‘Skunk Hour’.<sup>29</sup> Lowell’s nocturnal visitor can be read a metaphor for himself as a poet foraging for the exotic in the domestic, which could be reconciled with Heaney’s similar theme of searching for poetic inspiration in his marriage. Yet such Lowellian associations in ‘The Skunk’ are perhaps only superficial, given the uxorious mood and spiritual ambitions of Heaney’s poem. Heaney would later say that he associated the visitation of the skunk with the erotic (SS 205), a link which is certainly evident when we see his self-portrait in exiled solitude: the speaker is ‘tense as a voyeur’, writing ‘love-letters’, and ‘broaching the word “wife”’ with anticipatory excitement (FW 48). The poet’s description of life in the American residence reveals the kind of content that one could expect to find in his private correspondence: ‘The tang of eucalyptus spelt your absence’, ‘The aftermath of a mouthful of wine | Was like inhaling you off a cold pillow’ (FW 48). This painful sense of transatlantic distance generates, and bestows

<sup>29</sup> Robert Lowell, ‘Skunk-Hour’, *Robert Lowell’s Poems: A Selection* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), pp. 74-75, p. 75.

upon his absent wife, a sense of mystery and allurements, which leads to another zoomorphic comparison:

And there she was, the intent and glamorous,  
Ordinary, mysterious skunk,  
Mythologized, demythologized,  
Snuffing he boards five feet beyond me.

It all came back to me last night, stirred  
By the sootfall of your things at bedtime,  
Your head-down, tail-up hunt in a bottom drawer  
For the black plunge-line night dress. (FW 48)

Heaney's wife is transformed, as she was in 'The Otter', into a metaphysical vehicle: the poet has superimposed the two perspectives of the poem—the distant and the proximate—in order to view her as a mysterious creature within the domestic setting of their bedroom.

This desire to locate metaphysical mysteries within the physical proximity of marriage is most explicit in the eponymous poem of the volume, over which the influence of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is unmistakable. The speaker's partner is again shown as being physically beyond him, albeit now at least with sight:

I was standing watching you  
Take the pad from the gatehouse at the crossing  
And reach to lift a white wash off the whins (FW 52)

It may look like a domestic scene, but a mythical quality begins to permeate this realism when the speaker corrects his initial observation of the woman's extended arm: 'But your vaccination mark is on your thigh, | An O that's healed into the bark' (FW 53). This is a variation on Ovid's tale of Apollo and Daphne, where Daphne is transformed, out of her desire for protection from Apollo, into a laurel:

A filmy rind about her body grows;  
Her hair to leaves, her arm extended to boughs;  
The nymph is all into a laurel gone:  
The smoothness of her skin remains alone.  
Yet Phoebus loves her still, and casting round

Her bole, his arms, some little warmth he found.<sup>30</sup>

Heaney's adaptation of this mythical scene of adoration allows him to make an account of his wife's human body becoming magically changed: she becomes a 'wounded dryad' (FW 53). Daniel Tobin has suggested that, when the speaker goes on to say that the moon is their 'coin long gazed at | brilliant on the *Pequod*'s mast' (FW 53)—a reference to the enduring whaling-ship of *Moby Dick*—the two images of the poem 'combine stasis and ecstasy, for the moon appears stationary even as one moves, and the coin is the fixed centre of [that] ship's passage'.<sup>31</sup> Tobin views the moon in the poem primarily as evidence of Heaney's fascination with a 'sacred centre', and he is right to detect a combination of 'stasis' and 'ecstasy' here: Heaney's speaker, like Apollo who proclaims to Daphne 'I espouse thee for my Tree',<sup>32</sup> seems to be demonstrating a kind of ecstasy in imagining his eternal love—a kind of 'stasis'—for his wife and commitment to their domestic, familial life together (as she is accompanied by a 'mothering smell').

Yet Heaney's married life seems not so much ordinarily domestic as extraordinarily ritualistic when the couple are eventually envisaged facing each other in the countryside of Glanmore, and the poet poses as a kind of pagan priest. Pressing a leaf against his wife's hand ('its sticky juice to prime your skin'), he performs a mystical act of anointment:

I lick my thumb  
and dip it in mould,  
I anoint the anointed  
leaf-shape. (FW 55)

The mechanics of the ritual are concluded by the poet announcing that his wife is thus 'stained, stained | to perfection' (FW 55). Neil Corcoran has suggested that these lines are an

<sup>30</sup> Ovid, 'Book 1: The Transformation of Daphne into a Laurel', *Ovid's Metamorphoses: translated from the Latin, Volume I*, (Chiswick: C. Whittingham, 1822), p. 66.

<sup>31</sup> Daniel Tobin, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 164.

<sup>32</sup> Ovid, 'Book 1: The Transformation of Daphne into a Laurel', p. 66.

expression of *felix culpa*—the Christian concept of a ‘happy fault’.<sup>33</sup> Gail McConnell sees in the image a crisis of poetic subjectivity and an anxiety about recourse to Eucharistic signification. Heaney feels removed, she argues, from ‘any sacred source’.<sup>34</sup> It is difficult to see much anxiety here, given the pervasive emphasis on Romantic ambitions in *Field Work*. The image of ‘primed’ skin suggests that the poet and his wife are *closer* to a sacred source accessible through physical, sexual contact. Read in the biographical contexts which the poet wanted to ‘fortify’ in the book,<sup>35</sup> the poem transfers ownership of the divine sanction from the formal realm of religion in the actual realm of nature: the religious ceremony which took place in Ardboe in August 1965, where he and his wife received the sacrament of marriage, has been superseded by a more organic sacrament—a Romantic relocation. The ‘birthmark’ (FW 55) pigmented on Marie’s hand suggests, finally, that she has been born again into her original self; her spiritualized form, like O’Neill’s, emerges as a symbol adequate to Heaney’s overarching metaphysical aspiration in *Field Work*. In exploring his Romantic impulses, his private domestic world has become a spiritual haven in which he has found instances of both quickening excitement and comfort.

<sup>33</sup> Neil Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 100.

<sup>34</sup> Gail McConnell, “‘Its flesh was sweet | Like thickened wine’: Iconography and Sacramentalism in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney’, p. 102.

<sup>35</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in Frank Kinahan, p. 9.

## 5. 'Making Strange': Defamiliarization in *Station Island*

In this chapter I will consider the way *Station Island* breaks from *Field Work*'s Wordsworthian Romanticism and employs defamiliarization, the artistic technique which makes the known and habitual appear strange again; dramatizes a Dantean literary-spiritual pilgrimage against the architecture, landscape and ritual legalisms of the actual religious pilgrimage at Lough Derg, County Donegal (which Heaney undertook three times as a Queen's student); and concludes with a cycle of glosses from the ancient Irish text *Buile Suibhne* which he translated as *Sweeney Astray*. *Station Island* has a tripartite structure, which could be seen as a microcosm of Heaney's oeuvre: glimmerings of spirituality, the quest to transcend worldly concerns, and writing from an enlightened perspective. In Part One, the poet imaginatively detaches himself from reliance on his wife for spiritual respite, and draws on the Russian Formalist idea of defamiliarization, with its emphasis on altered perceptions of reality and strangeness, as a means by which a revelatory perspective on the world might be generated. In 'Station Island', the poet-pilgrim meets several Catholic ghosts, including a Carmelite monk who instructs him to translate St John of the Cross's 'Song of the Soul that Rejoices in Knowing God through Faith'; by doing so he reaches an accommodation with Christian asceticism whilst developing his own spiritual aesthetic. 'Sweeney Redivivus', the third and final section, dramatizes a transformed aerial view of Ireland through the customized mask of Sweeney, whose existential condition Heaney identified as being 'piercingly exposed to the beauties and severities of the natural world'.<sup>1</sup> The volume's focus on solitude, self-deprivation and strangeness hints at an underlying—and perhaps necessary—scepticism about whether the mask of this mythical bird-man truly allows for an enlightened view of the world, or offers a heightened apprehension of it which, like most visionary states of mind, cannot be sustained.

<sup>1</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Sweeney Astray* (Derry: Field Day, 1983), p. vi

The critical response to *Station Island* has mostly focused on its sociopolitical themes, but some readers have attempted to pay attention to Heaney's overarching spiritual ambitions in the volume. Both Henry Hart and Daniel Tobin highlight the influence of James Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949)—in a letter to Tobin, Heaney acknowledged that he was influenced by Campbell's book—which charts the 'monomyth' of initiation, separation and return: 'a hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from his mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man'.<sup>2</sup> Hart only applies the theory to the title sequence,<sup>3</sup> but Tobin applies it to all three sections of the volume. Heaney's use of this *rite de passage*, Tobin argues, 'presupposes that we are not complete at birth and must be born, spiritually, a second time'.<sup>4</sup> Tobin is right to contextualise the volume as a metaphysical and religious quest for enlightenment, given that Heaney, who sets out on his own in the volume's first poem, completes in many respects the rite of defamiliarization using the Sweeney persona.

### 5.1. Strangeness and Reality

The opening poem of Part One, 'The Underground', shows the Heaneys 'honeymooning' in 1965 and running to catch a train in the London Underground. According to the poem, the bride's coat 'flapped wild and button after button | Sprang off and fell in a trail', which prompts the speaker to retrace 'the path back, lifting the buttons'. With each button retrieved, Heaney's younger self seems to flash and fade like a hologram as we can make out the older man coming into view in the Orphic final stanza; he ends up:

draughty lamplit station

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Campbell, 'The Hero and the God', *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949, 1999), p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Hart, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 165.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Tobin, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 176.

After the trains have gone, the wet track  
Bared and tense as I am, all attention  
For your step following and damned if I look back. (SI 13)

The Underground is the Underworld: the older Heaney in sharper focus is playing the role of Orpheus to Marie's Eurydice; in *Field Work*, She was claimed as a source of spiritual rejuvenation, but like Eurydice, it now seems that she must be left behind as part of the poet's necessary journey. In this mythic parallel, Heaney seems to be primarily moving himself into the lonelier stance that he will characterise in the biblical terms of 'The King of the Ditchbacks', where he calls himself a 'rich young man | leaving everything he had | for a migrant solitude' (SI 58). But this impulse is common in the human quest for spiritual enlightenment, as James Campbell's writing on myth has shown: the first work of the spiritual aspirant, Campbell says, is to retreat from the world of secondary effects to those causal zones of the psyche, to break through to Jungian archetypal images in a process which Buddhist and Hindu philosophy identifies as *viveka*, 'discrimination'.<sup>5</sup> 'The Underground' suggests that Heaney will attempt to go beyond the insulated globe of marriage and confront the metaphysical unease of individual Being from which to apprehend revealed truth.

Heaney's aesthetic approach to this truth is most notably explicated by the programmatic poem 'Making Strange' which employs the Russian Formalist Victor Schlovsky's *ostranenie* as a mode of enlightenment. Originally published as 'Near Anahorish' in 1979,<sup>6</sup> the poem draws its imagery from an autobiographical event: Heaney had picked up the American poet Louis Simpson at the airport to drive him to a scheduled poetry reading at Ulster University in Coleraine, and along the way they stopped off at a small pub only a few hundred yards from Mossbawn where Heaney's father, Patrick, arrived

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Campbell, 'Myth and Dream', *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'Near Anahorish', *Ploughshares* Vol 5 No 3 September 1979, pp. 23-24; see Rand Brandes and Michael J. Durkan, *Seamus Heaney: A Bibliography, 1959-2003* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), p. 323.



unexpectedly, ‘unshorn and bewildered | in the tubs of his wellingtons’ (*SI* 32). Heaney’s father is the familiar face and Anahorish is the familiar place, and Simpson is the unfamiliar face with the unfamiliar accent (‘his speech like the twang of a bowstring’). A ‘cunning middle voice’ emanates from across a nearby field and offers reconciliation between the two, but when Simpson is later taken around the local areas by then synonymous with Heaney’s work, the order of things is reversed:

I found myself driving the stranger  
through my own country, adept  
at dialect, reciting my pride  
in all that I knew, that began to make strange  
at the same recitation. (*SI* 32-33)

Here is the moment of defamiliarization where something comes undone in the performance of the tour guide: Heaney claims to be ‘adept at dialect’, indicating that dialect is no longer natural for him—which, by definition, it should be—but rather a foreign language that he has retained the ability to speak.<sup>7</sup> The operative term ‘make strange’, as Daniel Tobin has said, reflects Schlovsky’s process of estrangement in which art shakes Heaney from habitual perceptions.<sup>8</sup> In describing his country to the visitor he sees it anew himself; the experience has ‘rent | the veil of the usual’, as he will later put it in ‘Drifting Off’ (*SI* 104)

‘Strange’ is a word that recurs through *Stepping Stones*; it is one to which Heaney is evidently attached: ‘strangeness’, he avers, ‘is good’ (*SS* 323). This revelatory strangeness is also explored in ‘Remembering Malibu’, a poem dedicated to Brian Moore, whom Heaney visited during his first year in California in 1970 and considered as a writer who estranged himself from middle-class Catholics in Belfast. In juxtaposing the western coast of America

<sup>7</sup> See Bernard O’Donoghue, ‘Limbo of Lost Words: The Sweeney complex’, *Seamus Heaney and the language of poetry* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf 1994).

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Tobin, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 206.

and the Christian monastic islands in southwestern Ireland, the poem gestures to Piet

Mondrian's 'Zeeland' paintings between 1909 and 1911:<sup>9</sup>

The Pacific at your door was wilder and colder  
than my notion of the Pacific

and that was perfect, for I would have rotted  
beside the luke-warm ocean I imagined.

Yet no way was its cold ascetic  
as our monk-fished, snowed-into Atlantic;

no beehive hut for you  
on the abstract sands of Malibu—

it was early Mondrian and his dunes  
misting towards the ideal forms (*SI* 30)

This is another case in which transcendent aesthetics (Mondrian's 'ideal forms') gain authority over events (Heaney's visit to Moore's home): Mondrian described the 'early' period alluded to here as one when he developed a feeling that painting had to find 'a new way of expressing the beauty of nature' and develop an art towards 'the expression of pure reality'.<sup>10</sup> This could stand as a description of Heaney's own processes of defamiliarization as a means of enlightenment; the poem concludes with Heaney in America attempting, perhaps in emulation of Moore, to 'rear and kick and cast' his cultural baggage 'welted solid to my instep':

beside that other western sea  
far from the Skelligs, and far, far  
from the suck of puddled, wintry ground,  
our footsteps filled with blowing sand. (*SI* 31)

The collective pronoun ('our footsteps') betrays Heaney's increasing identification not only with what he perceives as the enlightened detachment of Moore in California, but Mondrian's

<sup>9</sup> See Marty Bax, 'Zeeland, 1909-1911', *Complete Mondrian* (Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2001), pp. 159-180.

<sup>10</sup> Piet Mondrian, 'Toward the True Vision of Reality', (New York: Valentine Gallery, 1941), np, reprinted in *Mondrian and His Studios: Colour in Space* (London: Tate Publishing, 2014), p. 11.

transitional artistic development towards disclosure of ‘pure reality’ by means of the abstraction and defamiliarization of superficial appearances.

Defamiliarization is similarly employed in ‘The Birthplace’, which recalls Heaney’s portrayal of his trip to Thomas Hardy’s home in Upper Bockhampton. The poem effectively overrides Heaney’s earlier aesthetic conviction that the land itself was a source of identity, concluding with writing gaining priority over sense-experience. ‘Everywhere being nowhere,’ Heaney speculates in the opening stanza of the third section, ‘who can prove | one place more than another?’ Heaney’s readers might respond to this question by pointing to the poet himself as the person who could not only prove *his* place, but argued convincingly for those of other writers in ‘The Sense of Place’ in 1977. ‘I am convinced,’ Heaney concluded in that lecture, ‘that it is to [...] the stable element, the land itself, that we must look for continuity’ (P 149). But the poet of *Station Island* now seems decidedly *unconvinced* and again looks to displaced words for insight:

*birthplace, roofbeam, whitewash,*  
*flagstone, hearth,*  
like unstacked iron weights

afloat among galaxies. (SI 35)

The poem ends with a clear inclination towards valuing free textual reality over constrained factual reality—or at least questioning the conventional sense that the latter is more authentic than the former. Thirty years earlier, Heaney recalls, he had stayed up all night to finish reading Hardy’s *The Return of the Native*:

The corncrake in the aftergrass

Verified himself, and I heard  
roosters and dogs, the very same  
as if he had written them. (SI 35)

Through artistic defamiliarization, the written word has the power to change the way reality is apprehended; it is thus increasingly valued as a possible means towards transformed perception, the basis of enlightenment.

The primacy of defamiliarization as an aesthetic function in Part One is also evident in ‘The Loaning’, a tripartite poem which combines, like ‘Making Strange’, familiarity with strangeness. In the first section of the poem, the repetition of the definite article in the title suggests that this is a familiar place that is altering from the known to the unknown, what the speaker conceives as walking into ‘the limbo of lost words’ (*SI* 51). The loaning is reclaimed (‘Then I knew why from the beginning | the loaning breathed on me’) thanks to the revitalising qualities of ‘a day close as a stranger’s breath’ (*SI* 51). The second section of the poem similarly evokes the somnolent rhythms of men talking in the tenebrous light of rural kitchens (‘Aye and Aye again and, when the dog shifted, | a curt *There boy!*’), the strangeness of which the poet dwells on for heightened perceptions:

I closed my eyes  
to make the light motes stream behind them  
and my head went airy, my chair rode  
high and low among the branches and the wind  
stirred up a rookery in the next long Aye. (*SI* 51)

The way in which Heaney stimulates this ‘airy’ dimension feels symptomatic of what he describes in his 1985 Kavanagh lecture as an ‘imagined realm’ (*GT* 3) that has been generated from a specific topographical location. Once the speaker’s eyes reopen, he consciously provokes a defamiliarized perspective—perhaps a deliberate distortion of clear vision—on reality; there is hyper-attentiveness to what hitherto might be dismissed as mere background noise, showing the reader that making strange is simply perceiving what is already there in a new, vividly appreciative way:

Stand still. You can hear  
everything going on. High-tension cables  
singing above cattle, tractors, barking dogs,  
juggernauts changing gear a mile away.

And always the surface noise of the earth  
you didn't know you'd hear till a twig snapped  
and a blackbird's volubility  
stopped short. (*SI* 52)

In contrast to *Field Work*'s attempts to tap into 'a deep no sound' beyond the earth, this artistic technique of re-perceiving what is all around him permits clarified apprehension of 'everything going on' on the earth's surface.

One of the strangest poems, not only in *Station Island* but in Heaney's oeuvre as a whole, is 'The King of the Ditchbacks', a triptych which begins with an enigmatic male creature whose allure catches the attention of the narrator and seems to enact a kind of conversion *into* the vivid dimension—the virtual reality—revealed by defamiliarization. It is dedicated to John Montague, in whose 'The Source' Heaney detected the now-preferred condition that 'it is hard to say whether this writing belongs more to the place or to the language' (*PW* 71). This can be appropriated as commentary on 'The King of the Ditchbacks': the poem conjures the image of a male trespasser unbolting what initially seems like a metaphorical 'forgotten gate' beyond which lies a 'dark morse | along the bank' (*SI* 56). As the poem unfurls like tangled growth at the 'lower bars' of that gate, it becomes increasingly and tantalizingly difficult to make a distinction between fact (what belongs to place) and fiction (belonging to language): 'I am haunted', the speaker says, 'by his stealthy rustling' (*SI* 56). Even when this section of the poem gestures to the predominance of writing—if he stops, he says, so too will his elusive shadow, which suggests that this world conjured up by the writing—it is difficult to suspend disbelief in the actuality of this strange zone generated by defamiliarization. The other poems discussed above allow us to see aesthetics being draped over given autobiographical realities, making them strange and heightened versions of themselves, but here the latter seems to be a virtual reality within which we can see a translated version of Seamus Heaney.

As the poem moves through the second part of the triptych there *is* a perceptible distance between the everyday world and this virtual dimension, particularly when the poet experiments with the prose form of *Sweeney Astray*:

I was sure I knew him. The time I'd spent obsessively in that upstairs room bringing myself closer to him: each entranced hiatus as I chainsmoked and stared out of the dormer into the grassy hillside I was laying myself open. He was depending on me as I hung out on the limb of a translated phrase like a youngster dared out on to an alder branch over the whirlpool. Small dreamself in the branches. (SI 58)

We are back in Heaney's study, an 'upstairs room' like that in the New Testament where the disciples meet for the first time after Jesus ascends to Heaven, and Heaney and Sweeney are co-dependent, the former for a refreshed outlook on reality and the latter for literary reincarnation. Evident here is what Heaney called in 'The Birthplace' the writer's 'dream of discipline' (SI 34), with the act of translation stimulating self-transcendence:

After I had dared these invocations, I went back towards the gate to follow him. And my stealth was second nature to me, as if I were coming into my own. I remembered I had been vested for this calling. (SI 58)

Now the distinctly spiritual quality of Heaney's defamiliarized aesthetic becomes clear: the 'gate' from the first section of the poem has been requisitioned for the religious ceremony inspired by Heaney's 'invocations' of this 'dreamself', and the striking directness and religious parlance of the final sentence grabs the reader by the shoulders and looks them in the eye with a wild spiritual urgency befitting of Sweeney.

The third section of 'The King of the Ditchbacks' dramatizes Heaney's conversion into this virtual reality. Dressed with the headgear of a fishnet plaited with 'leafy twigs through meshes', the poet claims that 'my vision was a bird's':

And I saw myself  
rising to move to that dissimulation,  
  
top-knotted, masked in sheaves, noting  
the fall of birds: a rich young man  
  
leaving everything he had  
for a migrant solitude. (SI 58)

Heaney is now ‘Sweaney’,<sup>11</sup> as Paul Muldoon christened him. This, the final poem in the first part of the book, reconfirms the need for ‘solitude’ and the venturing spirit first hinted at in ‘The Underground’; the lonely vigil in the earlier poem is enhanced by the biblical parallel of the rich young man to whom Jesus averred the painful process of estrangement as the source of spiritual enlightenment. This biblical allusion also refers back to another poem in Part One of *Station Island*, ‘The Railway Children’, in which Heaney implicitly suggests that childhood perceptions of the world meet Jesus’s criteria for eternal life (‘We could stream through the eye of a needle’, *SI* 45). The child’s perspective will not be fully explored as a mode of enlightenment until *Seeing Things*; strangeness and the bird’s eye view are what characterize the aesthetic of *Station Island*. But before ‘Sweaney’ takes off on this new trajectory, a further rite of defamiliarization and perception-sharpening deprivation waits on Lough Derg in the volume’s title sequence.

## 5.2. Repining for the Eternal in ‘Station Island’

In Canto VI and Canto XI in ‘Station Island’, Heaney appears to recognise that sexual energies and literary translation are both means by which mystical states of enlightenment can be induced. Translating a passage of Dante’s *Inferno* and St John of the Cross’s ‘Song of the Soul that Rejoices in Knowing God by Faith’ in these respective poems, he closely aligns himself with a tradition of Christian mysticism which draws its language from physical descriptions of sexual love, one that has scriptural foundations in the Song of Songs. Like Dante and St John of the Cross, Heaney’s language of love and enlightenment places him at a somewhat oblique angle to Catholic sexual guilt and exaltation of celibacy—the idealism of refusing complicity in ‘impure’ thoughts of lust—represented by the religious settings of Lough Derg (and reflected in the fawning tone with which pilgrims pronounce “‘*Father*’” (*SI*

<sup>11</sup> See Paul Muldoon, ‘Sweaney Peregrine’, *London Review of Books*, Vol. 6, No.20, 1 Nov 1984, pp. 20-22.

69) in Canto IV). It places him further still from orthodox versions of Christianity which promulgate the idea of God's utter transcendence and deny any possibility of eternal life in the sensual here and now. Heaney's view of sexuality as a means of enlightenment actually resembles more closely the discourse of pagan traditions which associate sexual energies with spiritual insight, a link reinforced by frequent gestures to the pre-Christian pagus in this volume. Canto VI and Canto XI also gesture forward to the connection between literary translation and spiritual revelation in the Sweeney poems: 'Translated, given, under the oak tree' (SI 76).

Canto VI in 'Station Island' is a triptych of sonnets which relates Heaney's experiences of religious sexual guilt—what he has elsewhere called 'the usual Catholic adolescent griefs' (SS 405)—drawing on the second canto in Dante's *Inferno* as a means of progressing towards a connection between literary translation, sexual love and spiritual development. The first sonnet conjures a girl from the poet's youth:

Freckle-face, fox-head, pod of the broom,  
Catkin-pixie, little fern-swish:  
Where did she arrive from?  
Like a wish wished  
And gone, her I chose at "secrets"  
And whispered to. When we were playing houses. (SI 75)

This unexpected bolt of carnal energy from boyhood sparks the pilgrim into a heightened state of consciousness like that of the quickened, tantalizing mood that characterised *Field Work*'s 'Glanmore Sonnets' and marriage poems, albeit one that is an essentially different: more revelatory and life-changing than the advent of sacral sexuality. The 'Catkin-pixie' awakens and engrosses the pilgrim's imagination so completely that he is left somewhat debilitated, 'sunstruck at the basilica door' (SI 75), which recalls *La Vita Nuova* when Dante first sees Beatrice 'at about the beginning of her ninth year':



At that very moment, and I speak the truth, the vital spirit, the one that dwells in the most secret chamber of the heart, began to tremble so violently that even the most minute veins of my body were strangely affected; and trembling, it spoke these words: “Here is a god stronger than I who is coming to rule over me.”<sup>12</sup>

But the pilgrim’s response to this ‘vital spirit’ of divinely infused sexuality is also bound up in, and hampered by, the encroaching Catholic morality symbolised by the bell of the pilgrimage, the levying sound of which he now attempts to mentally block out: ‘I shut my ears to the bell. | Head hugged. Eyes shut. Leaf ears. *Don’t tell, don’t tell*’ (SI 75).

Yet despite this encroachment of religious asceticism (or perhaps inadvertently *because* of it), the sexual energy keeps the pilgrim in what Joyce later calls his ‘fasted, light-headed, dangerous’ state of mind (SI 93), causing him to break from the organised tracks of the religious circuits in the second sonnet in Canto VI: ‘A stream of pilgrims answering the bell | Trailed up the steps as I went down them’ (SI 75). This change of direction marks a transgression—a sin, in the Christian terms of the pilgrimage—in following private impulse. It also evokes Dante’s initial realisation in *La Vita Nuova* that he is different to other ‘pilgrims, moving along pensively’ and that Beatrice’s love is his true source of ‘blessedness’.<sup>13</sup> Heaney’s pilgrim-self begins to articulate a similarly spiritualized passion. ‘Loosen the toga for wine and poetry’, he declares, like Dante in *La Vita Nuova*, to no discernible listener except himself (SI 75). With this inner resolution, the pilgrim proceeds to transgressively undermine the purity of vision embodied by the Virgin Mary, a female archetype of sexual virtue with whom he associates sleep rather than any more stimulating nocturnal activities:

<sup>12</sup> Dante Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, trans. Mark Musa (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), pp. 3-4.

<sup>13</sup> Dante Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, trans. Mark Musa (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), p. 83.

As a somnolent hymn to Mary rose  
I felt an old pang that bags of grain  
And the sloped shafts of forks and hoes  
Once mocked me with, at my own long virgin  
Fasts and thirsts, my nightly shadow feasts,  
Haunting the granaries of words like *breasts*. (SI 75)

This searching for ways to describe sexual frustration suggests the reader that the pilgrim is now on his way to fulfilling a rite of passage in which the relationship between art, sex and spirituality can be positively reimagined.

In the third sonnet of Canto VI, the pilgrim begins by twice using the metaphor of a keyhole to contrast religious idealism with sexual liberation, evoking the erotic energies represented by the act of translating a passage from Dante's *Inferno*. In the first instance of the keyhole metaphor, the pilgrim portrays himself as a guilt-stricken Catholic, feeling the 'old pang' of impurity as he confesses his sexual sins to a priest: 'As if I knelt at a keyhole | Mad for it, and all that ever opened | Was the breathed-on grille of a confessional' (SI 76). The primary allusion here to heightened sexual appetite suggests that erotic energies are something so fundamental to individual Being that, rather than being denied, they must be accommodated by any program of spiritual growth. The second image of the keyhole reaffirms this positive view of sexuality and its connection to spirituality, the poet turning his attention to a fulfilling and transformative experience of seeing an anonymous woman's 'honey-skinned' shoulders through 'the wide keyhole of her keyhole dress' (SI 76). The language of guilt and pain is now that of 'kindness' and 'luck', and sexual desire is indeed channelled into the quest of spiritual enlightenment like Dante's revival through sexual love in the *Inferno*:

*As the little flowers that were all bowed and shut  
By the night chills rise on their stems and open  
As soon as they have felt the touch of sunlight,  
So I revived in my own wilting powers  
And my heart flushed, like somebody set free.  
Translated, given, under the oak tree. (SI 76)*

Here is the moment of release in Canto VI, and the moment where sex and writing come into explicit and revelatory alignment: the act of translation is conjoined—in this imagery—with the force of an erection; the passionate pilgrim has established in his spiritual development what Dante calls in *La Vita Nuova* the ‘intelligence of love’.<sup>14</sup>

The prominent role here of translation in the pilgrim’s enlightenment gestures forward to the cleansed perception in ‘Sweeney Redivivus’, but it also helps contextualise the mysticism of Canto XI. A poem which combines autobiographical events and a translation of St John of the Cross’s ‘Song of the Soul that Rejoices in Knowing God through Faith’, this is perhaps one of the clearest expressions of mystical aspirations in Heaney’s poetry. The opening stanzas of the poem draw upon its author’s memory of a childhood Christmas gift and his time at St Columb’s College, Derry; as a young boy he received a kaleidoscope from Santa Claus, a toy he came to see as emblematic of the Irish Catholic predilection for ‘inward wonder’;<sup>15</sup> at St Columb’s in the 1950s, a Discalced Carmelite monk led a spiritual retreat and instructed Heaney and his schoolmates to read poems as prayers. When, in the opening stanzas of Canto XI, this cleric arises genie-like from a kaleidoscope, he offers the pilgrim a penance echoing the Carmelite’s earlier injunction:

a monk’s face  
that had spoken years ago from behind a grille  
spoke again about the need and chance

to salvage everything, to re-envisage  
the zenith and glimpsed jewels of any gift  
mistakenly abased...

What came to nothing could always be replenished.  
“Read poems as prayers,” he said, “and for your penance  
translate me something by Juan de la Cruz.”

Returned from Spain to our chapped wilderness,  
his consonants aspirate, his forehead shining,

<sup>14</sup> Dante Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, trans. Mark Musa (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), p. 32.

<sup>15</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in Charlie Rose, ‘Interview with Seamus Heaney’, *Charlie Rose* <charlieroose.com. <https://charlieroose.com/videos/12382>> [accessed July 2017]

he made me feel there was nothing to confess. (SI 89)

Later, in 1994, Heaney would describe this man as ‘the first person within my own experience of Catholicism and the institutional Church who was radiant with what we often hear as the love of God. There was no No in him, it seemed; he seemed to have entered the realm of Yes [and made it] credible’.<sup>16</sup> This autobiographical detail sheds light on the sincere spiritual ambition of Heaney’s translation. While the pilgrim is liberated from the need to ‘confess’, he seems paradoxically glad to hear that his view of the world has been hitherto ‘mistakenly abased’; although mistaken thought has prevented a clear apprehension of reality, an altered, defamiliarized perspective can bring with it—and, like the Carmelite monk, make credible—a true vision of its jewel-like beauty.

Having encountered the monk and glimpsed the possibility of a revelatory altered perspective on the familiar, the pilgrim is moved to offer a translation which Heaney later noted that he used specifically to ‘help my unbelief’ (SS 234):

How well I know that fountain, filling, running,  
although it is the night.

That eternal fountain, hidden away,  
I know its haven and its secrecy  
although it is the night.

But not its source because it does not have one,  
Which is all sources’ source and origin  
although it is the night.

No other thing can be so beautiful.  
Here on earth and heaven drink their fill  
although it is the night.

So pellucid it never can be muddied,  
and I know that all light radiates from it  
although it is the night.

<sup>16</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in ‘God Moves in Mysterious Metres’, *Melbourne Writers’ Festival* (1994), online recording, *ABC Radio National*, produced by Margaret Coffey, uploaded Sunday 29 January 1995 <<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/archived/encounter/god-moves-in-mysterious-metres/6362332>> [accessed April 2018].

I know no sound-line can find its bottom,  
nobody ford or plumb its deepest fathom  
although it is the night. (*SI* 89-90)

The mysticism here is celebratory, with its focus on ineffability and beauty, and the implicit sexual thirst stands in contrast to the Hopkinsian well of cold water in Canto V: ‘I am repining’, the poet concludes, ‘for this living fountain’ (*SI* 90). St John of the Cross is an appropriate model for Heaney’s spirituality thanks to celebrated verses wherein he conceives of the night, and the love of God, using the metaphor of ecstatic love-making, what he calls being ‘fired with love’s urgent longings’:

O guiding night!  
O night more lovely than the dawn!  
O night that has united  
the Lover with his beloved,  
transforming the beloved in her Lover.<sup>17</sup>

The tantalizing mood of Heaney’s translation has presented difficulties for critics attempting to understand it in the context of the sequence as a whole. Neil Corcoran has suggested that the poem’s refrain ‘although it is the night’ undermines its declaration of faith and gestures to the withdrawal of God not only for the mystic but the ‘secular consciousness’ completing the translation.<sup>18</sup> But Henry Hart rightly argues that the darkness of the poem is better seen as an expression of the soul’s *via negativa*.<sup>19</sup> ‘Song of the Soul that Rejoices in Knowing God by Faith’ is a spiritual praise poem of the human love for, and deep-rooted knowledge of (‘How well I *know*’), beauty and the transcendent. When, in the concluding scene of ‘Station Island’, James Joyce famously urges Heaney to leave behind Catholic pieties and cultivate a work lust for writing, to ‘Let go, let fly, forget’ (*SI* 94), the translation of Dante in Canto VI and John of the Cross in Canto XI have already indicated the nature of his new allegiances,

<sup>17</sup> St John of the Cross, ‘Stanzas of the Soul’, *The Collected Works of John of the Cross*, trans. Otilio Rodriguez, Kieran Kavanaugh, (Washington: ICS Publications, 1991, 2017), p. 359.

<sup>18</sup> Neil Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 120.

<sup>19</sup> Henry Hart, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 176.

confirming his acquisition of what Joseph Campbell calls ‘the ultimate boon’ that will power his ‘magic flight’ in ‘Sweeney Redivivus’.<sup>20</sup>

### 5.3.Sweeney’s Flight

In the third and final section of *Station Island*, ‘Sweeney Redivivus’, Heaney concludes his rite of defamiliarization when he further signals his commitment, after Joyce’s tutelary advice, to prioritizing above social concerns an aesthetics which makes the world seem strange in order to disclose its true nature. This sequence, which contains some of the strangest poetry Heaney ever wrote, begins by reminding us that the virtual reality he will explore is textually generated:

Take hold of the shaft of the pen.  
Subscribe to the first step taken  
from a justified line  
into the margin. (*SI* 96)

This image of a writer translating and glossing a text has encouraged Rand Brandes to argue that the poem and those which follow should be understood from a perspective that determines Heaney’s primary alter-ego to be the ancient Irish scribe Moling, who writes down Sweeney’s story and lives it vicariously.<sup>21</sup> But ‘the margin’ here can also be seen as the space that was opened up when Heaney when he donned the regalia of Sweeney in ‘King of the Ditchbacks’ and entered ‘a migrant solitude’ intimately connected with his own artistic and personal circumstances. He would later offer a particularly instructive description of the way in which he created a narrative to house his Sweenified persona: each of the ensuing poems, as he explained in 1992, draw upon ‘some occasion or predicament of my own life, but conducted from a liberated, exorcised consciousness that I identified with that of Mad

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Campbell, ‘The Magic Flight’, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 30.

<sup>21</sup> See Rand Brandes, “‘Inscribed in Sheets’: Seamus Heaney’s Scribal Matrix”, *Seamus Heaney: The Shaping Spirit*, ed. Catherine Malloy and Phyllis Carey (London: Associated University Presses, 1996), pp. 47-70.

Sweeney'. The result, in Heaney's view, is 'a subjective correlative' in which the poet becomes, as in 'King of the Ditchbacks', an abstracted version of himself in an Irish 'phantasmagoria'.<sup>22</sup> But this is also a broader continuation of the defamiliarizing aesthetics that characterise Heaney's approach to reality in this book. Although they prove rewarding here as a means of psychic and spiritual freedom from the confines of the restrictive social vision of reality paradoxically brings the poet to a point where he must question the validity of language as a sustainable artistic medium for visionary experience.

Isolation and discomfort are made seem like an inherent part of the act of transformation. The speaker in the title poem is pitched towards a 'steep-flanked mound' and his head is 'like a ball of wet twine, | dense with soakage', but 'beginning | to unwind'. Exposure to elements in this lonely position makes the world look piercingly harsh: a bitter smell is 'blowing off the river'; familiar trees are nowhere to be seen; hedges are 'thing as penwork', and in view are 'hard paths and sharp-ridged houses'. In this, the first moment of Sweeney's vision, Heaney's speaker is 'incredible to myself' (*SI* 98). In 'Unwinding', the twine unravels further still: the speaker contemplates how 'sex-pruned and unfurtherable | moss-talk' will have to be 'unlearned' on this strange path of enlightenment: 'from there on everything | is going to be learning'. In the process of rejecting old ideas, the twine widens 'backwards through areas that forwarded | understandings of all I would undertake' (*SI* 99). Heaney's language is decidedly strange, and his alter ego is drawn to strange characters: in 'Drifting Off', he distrusts the cuckoo, who was central to *Field Work*, and rejects 'small-minded' wrens, pathetic waterhens, panicky corncrakes, stragglers, composed blackbirds and the folklore of magpies. Instead he is drawn to goldfinches and kingfishers who 'rent | the veil of the usual' (*SI* 104). Despite the disorientation—indeed because of it—Heaney is

<sup>22</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'The Frontier of Writing', *Irish Writers and their Creative Process*, edited by Jacqueline Genet and Wynne Hellegourac'h (Colin Smythe, 1996), pp. 8-9.

evidently determined to be ‘unwieldy | and brimming’ (SI 105) and ‘outstrip obedience’ (‘Alerted’, SI 106).

Heaney’s liberation from a contemporary society dominated not only by political ideology and circumscribed literary ideals, but also by aspirations towards monetary gain is dramatized by ‘The First Flight’. The opening stanzas of the poem offer a glimpse of the solitary poet ‘relearning’ his vision which can apprehend the *quidditas* of pebbles and berries, the smell of wild garlic, and most remarkably ‘the acoustic of frost’ (SI 103). This insight into the poet’s capacity for a heightened awareness of the true nature of things is quickly offset by the furore surrounding his departure to Wicklow in 1972 which he symbolises by his shadow moving over fields and his ‘empty place’ giving rise to ‘old rehearsals | of debts and betrayals’ (SI 103). The political and literary aspects of this are well-documented, but less remarked upon are the economic concerns of Heaney’s commitment to life as a freelance writer which unearthed, as one critic has said, the ‘thoroughly consumerist criteria which had by then dominated Southern Irish society’s legitimating criteria of social intelligibility’.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, in an editorial in *The Irish Times*, one contributor noted Heaney’s ‘brave decision’ but focused exclusively on the poet’s ability and opportunities to subsidise his income and fill the ‘short supply’ of artists in Ireland.<sup>24</sup> As well as the sociopolitical and literary conventions of the North, this economic interpretation of the poet’s function in society seems implicitly eschewed in Heaney’s declaration of freedom:

I was mired in attachment  
until they began to pronounce me  
a feeder off battlefields

so I mastered new rungs of the air  
to survey out of reach (SI 103)

<sup>23</sup> John Bell, ‘Compelling Identities: Nation and Lyric Form in Seamus Heaney’, (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Oxford, 1993), p. 155.

<sup>24</sup> ‘A Poet’s Life’, *Irish Times*, 18 August 1972, p. 11.



This rejection of materiality and attachment is recognizably spiritual language. In Buddhism, ‘attachment’ is a mental impediment, a crediting of fictions, which lead to misapprehension of the true nature of self and reality. While, moreover, ‘battlefields’ is certainly a reference to the violence in Northern Ireland, may also point to the bigger existential question which philosophers identify with the ‘field of life’ where one can fall into ‘misunderstanding, not only of oneself, but the nature of man and the cosmos’.<sup>25</sup>

Another instance in which Heaney combines autobiography and the aesthetics of a liberated, Sweeneyfied consciousness can be found in the imagery of ‘In the Beech’, in which he vividly defamiliarizes the bucolic vision set out in his 1974 radio essay ‘Mossbawn’. There he evokes a 1940s Irish farmyard blissfully immune to the ‘great historical action’ of World War II indicated by American soldiers temporarily stationed in the locale, picturing himself hiding in a ‘beech tree’: ‘a little Atlas shouldering it all, a little Cerunnos pivoting the world of antlers’, to look out ‘at the familiar yard as if it were suddenly behind a pane of strangeness’ (*P* 18). In the poem, as Sweeney, he flies directly to the same tree to give a starkly alternative picture of Mossbawn through estranged eyes. Soldiers preparing for D-Day are now presented with hyper-focused vision, with the pilot flying ‘so low I could see the cockpit rivets’: a new vision of the field, where the school-leaver discovered peace | to touch himself’ (*SI* 100), daringly recalls the emphasis on sexual revelation in the volume. The borders of the Irish farmyard seem to have been breached so that this newly-perceived environment feels exposed to endless spaces—historical, physical, and metaphysical—beyond. The beech tree itself becomes imbued with a new significance as Heaney’s ‘tree of knowledge’,

a strangeness and a comfort,  
as much as column as a bole. The very ivy  
puzzled its milk-tooth frills and tapers

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Campbell, ‘Freedom to Live’, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 221.

over the grain: was it bark or masonry? (SI 100)

The tree and poet are defamiliarized, the strangeness of one feeding into the other as the poet's bird's eye view offers a quizzical and finely-tuned examination of his immediate surroundings. The tree also alludes to the last stanza of Yeats's 'Among School Children', in which, as Richard Ellmann has said, the poet forms a 'secular adoration of the completed symbol of heavenly glory':<sup>26</sup> Yeats's poem, for Heaney, illustrates 'the necessary idea of transcendence' (AS 16) which appears to involve, as the dream-world of 'In the Beech' shows, the courage to defamiliarize and transcend our unfocused and threadbare perspective on reality.

Heaney takes the identity of spiritual acolyte in 'The Master', a poem which 'transmogrifies' his dinner that he shared with Czeslaw Milosz in a Californian restaurant in 1980 (SS 262). In a scene not unlike Rembrandt's archetypal philosopher lodging in a tower with helical stairs in *Meditation du philosophe*, Milosz becomes the quintessential guru of self-sufficiency in possession of his sacred 'book of withholding', dwelling 'in himself | like a rook in an unroofed tower' (SI 110). Heaney carefully climbs to this 'coign of seclusion' for instruction, with the master rewarding the student by showing him a well laid out text that contains 'nothing arcane' but rather a familiar notion of spiritual probity made strange in this airworld: 'Tell the truth. Do not be afraid.' (SI 110). Milosz figures elsewhere in this book as a source of wisdom: in 'Away from it All', Heaney borrows from *Native Realm* to express how he often felt, like Milosz, pulled between contemplation of 'a motionless point' and the 'command to participate | Actively in history'.<sup>27</sup> In contrast to that earlier, concrete reference, their encounter in the trees might seem *too* abstracted from the material world in which the poet and his interlocutor really enjoyed their meal; but what we are witnessing in this poem is

<sup>26</sup> Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (London: Penguin, 1948, 1979), p. 256.

<sup>27</sup> Czeslaw Milosz, 'Marxism', *Native Realm: A Search for Self-Definition* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1981), pp. 125-126.

the legitimization of Heaney's independent quest into such strange aesthetic places, and its last stanza has a convincing psychological realism distilled from autobiography:

How flimsy I felt climbing down  
The unrailed stairs on the wall,  
Hearing the purpose and venture  
In a wingflap above me. (*SI* 110)

In philosophical terms, the poem achieves *viveka*—the discrimination of reality—in pushing through the world of secondary effects to archetypal Jungian images: the instructive experience of dining out with Milosz, a spiritual exemplar with a shared theological background, in 1980s late-capitalist, modern America has been defamiliarized and represented as a timeless epiphany.

The link between sexual energy and translation—like the repining of Canto VI and Canto XI in 'Station Island'—also stirs the visionary perception of 'In the Chestnut Tree', where Heaney draws upon erotic imagery from the Book of Daniel. When Sweeney lands in the tree, his wiry cold body senses a nearby presence, a middle-aged woman undressing for a swim: 'Body heat under the leaves, matronly | slippage and hoistings' (*SI* 113). Thirst is tangible in this description, recalling, with the drop of 'purse and earrings', 'The Skunk', where the poet is stirred by 'the sootfall' of his partner's clothes at bedtime (*FW* 48). Sweeney, however, suffers the pang of sexual frustration, as he wonders what 'does she care | for the lean-shanked and thorny' (remove the t from the latter adjective and you get the birdman's condition). Recognizing the bather's likely unresponsiveness, he invokes a biblical antecedent, describing her as 'old firm-fleshed Susannah'. Famed for beauty and nobility, Susannah is stalked by two elders as she bathes in the garden pool: overwhelmed by lust, they conspire (unsuccessfully) to blackmail her into an affair.<sup>28</sup> Sweeney's object of desire is no less dazzling but, unlike her namesake, remains free from harm and unselfconsciously

<sup>28</sup> Daniel 13: 1-64.

relaxed: ‘She breathes deep and stirs up the algae’ (*SI* 113). As she moves through the pool, there are echoes of ‘The Otter’, where the swimmer’s wet flesh leaves the poet ‘dry-throated’ (*FW* 47). But the mask of Sweeney allows the poet to indulge a more transgressive voyeurism: sexual desire can also be crazed, intensifying, like translation, our perception of reality—if only transiently. The mystical dimension occupied by Sweeney is energized by unsatisfied yearning.

This uncivilised wildness of desire is also conveyed by ‘Sweeney’s Returns’, another poem where, like ‘Night-Drive’, Heaney is seeking to reunite with his wife, seeking to reunite with his wife, and where, like ‘The Skunk’, distance has made the heart grow fonder. Sweeney’s voyage above green peninsulas, cattle and roads is punctuated by fantasies of more slippages: he imagines his lover’s clothes ‘half-slipped | off the chair’, and the ‘dawn-fending blind, her eyelids’ | glister and burgeon’ (*SI* 114). When he sits on the window sill to inspect his lover’s room, appraising his ‘coffers of absence’ and feeling ‘like a scout at risk behind lines’, his lust heightens: ‘the throb of his breakthrough | going on inside him unstoppably’. Scanning the room, he can only find traces of her, and feels the shock of seeing his own face: ‘I floundered | in my wild reflection in the mirror’ (*SI* 114). The voyeur has caught himself out. It’s rare to see one like this, estranged in a moment of heightened anticipation.

The galvanizing force of desire that underpins Sweeney’s flight is captured by ‘Holly’, a poem which reflects the paradox that a feeling of exposure to physical reality depends, in this sequence, on language and translation. it now depends on language and translation. The speaker recalls a physical experience from childhood when he gathered holly in flooded ditches (‘our hands were all jags || and water ran up our sleeves’): the bounty lacked berries, and ‘gleamed like smashed bottle-glass’ (*SI* 115). As an adult, he is surrounded by artificially perfect holly: ‘Now here I am, in a room that is decked | with the

red-berried, waxy-leafed stuff” (ibid). It is deeply unsatisfactory, and stimulates a craving for the real thing of the past, however imperfect:

I reach for a book like a doubter  
and want it to flare round my hand,  
  
a black-letter bush, a glittering shield-wall  
cutting as holly and ice. (*SI* 115)

Heaney recasts Thomas’s need for tangible evidence and direct experience of Jesus’s wounds: he reaches for textual sources which might cut through superficialities and reveal a true vision of things. Heaney’s ice is a variation on MacNeice’s ‘Snow’, the winter imagery and insight of which his poem—indeed the whole of ‘Sweeney Redivivus’—evokes: ‘World is suddener than we fancy it’.<sup>29</sup> Having perceived reality in a strange light, it is impossible for Heaney to accept second-hand imitations.

A combination of the poet’s theological background and this sequence’s aesthetics of airborne strangeness further informs ‘In Illo Tempore’. The first three stanzas of the poem recount Heaney’s experiences as a practicing Catholic at boarding school, with the final two stanzas cutting back to the poet as an adult—feeling the after-effects of his defamiliarized, Sweenified perception—living in contemporary Dublin. Remembering the architecture, paraphernalia and language of the Latin Mass at school, the poet uses a linguistic metaphor which evokes the poet’s love of language, which befits the emphasis on writing and translation throughout the book:

Intransitively we would assist,  
confess, receive. The verbs  
assumed us. We adored.  
  
And we lifted our eyes to the nouns.  
Altar-stone was dawn and monstrance noon,  
the word rubric itself a bloodshot sunset. (*SI* 118)

<sup>29</sup> Louis MacNeice, ‘Snow’, *Collected Poems*, edited by Peter McDonald (North Carolina: Wake Forest University Press, 2013), p. 24.

But the speaker is experiencing a comparative lack of faith, claiming that the physical world ‘hardly tempts me to credit it’. This feeling has structural significance, given that it leads towards the final vision of spiritual dryness which is in keeping with the limited resources the Sweeney story can give the quester for enlightenment.

This sense of limitation is confirmed by the long, strange concluding poem of the cycle, ‘On the Road’, a phantasmagoria of fiction and autobiography that seems to carry Heaney to his next point of departure: the ultimate denial of language as a credible medium for conveying or inducing spiritual language, a scepticism that will generate the *via negativa* of *The Haw Lantern*. The poem begins with the by now familiar trope of the poet in ‘the trance of driving’ (SI 119). Punctuated by the dialogue of Jesus and the rich young man (‘*Master, what must I do / to be saved?*’), the imagery and language of the poem is distinctly spiritual: the speaker imagines himself as ‘a human soul | that plumes from the mouth’, and speaks of ‘scaling heaven | by superstition’. The surroundings are predominantly ecclesiastical, with the bird-man perched on ‘a chapel gable’ and later roosting during the night on a ‘churchyard wall’ where human hands keep wearing away at the ‘cold, hard-breasted | votive granite’. We might recognise in this haunting of an empty church a hunger to be more serious, to borrow Larkin’s phrase,<sup>30</sup> and indeed Heaney gravitates once more to sacred grounds when he flies beyond Ireland to the ‘deepest chamber’ of the Lascaux caves to contemplate the painting on its walls of deer sniffing at ‘a dried-up source’ (SI 121). Perhaps. But there is a deeper need that is motivating this pilgrimage and imagery, the desire to draw sustenance from a spiritually generative source, as reflected in the final lines of the poem:

For my book of changes  
I would meditate  
that stone-faced vigil

<sup>30</sup> Philip Larkin, ‘Church Going’, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 99.

until the long dumbfounded  
spirit broke cover  
to raise a dust  
in the font of exhaustion. (*SI* 121)

This is a reference to the *I Ching*, an ancient Chinese manual of divination based on eight symbolic trigrams and sixty-four hexagrams, interpreted in terms of the philosophical principles of yin and yang. In this way the ‘font of exhaustion’ is indicative not of frustration but of future renewal. Elsewhere, moreover, Heaney has spoken of his imaginative interest, at the end of *Station Island*, in ‘definite space which is both empty and full of potential’, a sense of ‘a node that is completely clear where emptiness and potential stream in opposite directions’.<sup>31</sup> This apprehension of emptiness will inform the negative theology that underpins Heaney’s next volume.

<sup>31</sup>See Rand Brandes, ‘Seamus Heaney: An Interview’, *Salmagundi* 80 (1988), pp. 4-21, p. 5.

## 6. Emptied Space: The *Via Negativa* of *The Haw Lantern*

The approach to enlightenment in Heaney's seventh major volume, *The Haw Lantern*, owes much to a tradition of apophatic theology—the *via negativa*—which expresses radical doubt about the capacity of language to convey spiritual experience. One critic described the volume as 'trendy aesthetic morality' which 'falters in trying to say what life means for most of us',<sup>1</sup> but Heaney's 1986 T.S. Eliot lectures—collected as *The Government of the Tongue*—demonstrate how its ethics and universalizing exigency are primarily concerned with the 'jurisdiction' of poetry as 'its own reality' (*GT* 101). Heaney would also promulgate, in his Ellmann lectures delivered in the same year that *The Haw Lantern* was published, 'the necessity in the mature artist of a preparedness for a *via negativa*' (*PW* 67). Structurally, the volume reflects this 'necessity': the opening poem 'Alphabets' immediately casts doubt about language as a medium by which to convey transcendent experiences and, in search for relatable terms, looks to the Neoplatonic metaphysics of Marsilio Ficino, while the closing poem, 'The Riddle', confirms that the spiritual aesthetics of the volume do indeed constitute a '*via negativa*' (*HL* 51). To acknowledge the unsayable and ungraspable is a fundamental mark of Heaney's insight in this volume, and it might be seen as an early glimmer of the spirit of acceptance that will characterize the later books from *The Spirit Level* to *Human Chain*. Beginning with a discussion of the negative charting at the outset negative theology in 'Alphabets' and 'The Riddle', this chapter seeks to demonstrate the circumspect approach to the transcendent that characterises this volume.

### 6.1. 'Not just single things': Neoplatonism and Apophatic Theology

In its literary compound of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Yeats's 'Among Schoolchildren', and Vaughan's 'The Retreat', 'Alphabets' somewhat paradoxically

<sup>1</sup> Michael Allen, 'Holding Course': *The Haw Lantern* and Its Place in Heaney's Development', *Seamus Heaney: Contemporary Critical Essays*, edited by M. Allen (London: Basingstoke, 1997), pp. 193-207, p. 196, p. 205.



expresses doubt about the capacity of language to conceptualise an enlightened perspective, even as it concludes with the Neoplatonic metaphysics of a universe in harmony. In the poem Heaney evokes a parallel between the increasing distance from the physical world that accompanied his education, and his acquisition, like Stephen Dedalus, of sophisticated grammar and abstract thought. Where he once saw a fork in the letter ‘Y’, slated rafters in the capital ‘A’, or a ‘swan’s back’ in the number 2, his mature frame of reference, as a smiling public man like the middle-aged Yeats, is no longer that of physical objects but the texts of ‘Shakespeare’ and ‘Graves’. At the end of the first section, we see the first glimmer of this reversal when, after learning in English lessons what is ‘correct with a little leaning hoe’, the child’s consciousness records a ‘globe in the window’ which ‘tilts like a coloured O’ (*HL* 1). In the recollection of that perceptual shift lies a profound sense of regret for the trajectory which follows, one that is expressed when the globe spins forward in time and westwards in direction to the ‘wooden O’ of a Harvard lecture theatre in the final section:

Time has bulldozed the school and school window.  
Balers drop bales like printouts where stoked sheaves

Made lambdas on the stubble once at harvest  
And the delta face of each potato pit  
Was patted straight and moulded against frost.  
All gone, with the omega that kept

Watch above each door, the good-luck horseshoe. (*HL* 3)

As a poem commissioned as a *celebration* of education, ‘Alphabets’ does not make a convincing case, with its obvious feelings of nostalgia undermining any clear narrative on the joys and benefits of higher learning (or teaching) in the late twentieth-century. In the lamenting undertones of the narrative we can hear Vaughan’s craving for the days of ‘angel infancy’ before he ‘understood this place’:

Some men a forward motion love;  
But I by backward steps would move,

And when this dust falls to the urn,  
In that state I came, return.<sup>2</sup>

Vaughan cries out in his distrust of the ‘forward motion’ of time and progress and, anticipating the Romantics, seeks to retrieve his childhood capacities instilled by the ‘enlightened spirit’. Heaney, like Vaughan, seems dissatisfied by the ways in which education has limited his mind, and he clearly wants to tread the former path of immediate imaginative contact with what he called ‘the real thing’—a phrase we will later see in ‘Hailstones’—of the physical world (SS 262). When the poem concludes with a young, ‘pre-reflective’ Heaney watching a bricklayer spell out the family name, it comes close, as Bernard O’Donoghue has written, to saying that language is an affectation or at best a tidying up process for the mind’s true descriptions.<sup>3</sup>

Yet behind this account of dissatisfaction in ‘Alphabets’ is Heaney’s countervailing recourse to the Neoplatonic metaphysics of Marsilio Ficino, the Renaissance philosopher whose work the poet first read, as Rand Brandes has shown, in Frances Yates’s *Giordano Bruno and The Hermetic Tradition* (1964).<sup>4</sup> With the poem coming to its conclusion Heaney quotes Ficino’s *Opera Omnia*:

shape-note language, absolute on air  
As Constantine’s sky-lettered IN HOC SIGNO  
Can still command him; or the necromancer

Who would hang from the domed ceiling of his house  
A figure of the world with colours in it  
So that the figure of the universe  
And ‘not just single things’ would meet his sight

When he walked abroad. (HL 3)

<sup>2</sup> Henry Vaughan, ‘The Retreat’, *Henry Vaughan: The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 137.

<sup>3</sup> Bernard O’Donoghue, *Seamus Heaney*, pp. 111-112.

<sup>4</sup> Rand Brandes, “‘Letter by Strange Letter’: Yeats, Heaney, and the Aura of the Book’ *New Hibernia Review* | *Iris Éireannach Nua*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Summer, 1998), pp. 28-47, p. 39.

The ‘necromancer’ to whom Heaney alludes is Ficino’s spiritual Everyman constructing images on the dome of his ceiling: ‘when he comes out of his house he will perceive, not so much the spectacle of individual things, but the figure of the universe’.<sup>5</sup> Rand Brandes has suggested that Heaney’s ‘necromancer’ resembles Yates’s description of Giordano Bruno working with ‘untiring industry’ to add to his Neoplatonic wheel of memory.<sup>6</sup> This is true by extension, because Bruno, while he sought to discern the root in all thought capable of expressing the duality of God and nature, mostly used the language of Ficino’s Neoplatonism.<sup>7</sup> In addition, and as we shall see later in this chapter, Bruno’s wheel bears some resemblance to the symbol of a concentric rose window in ‘The Mud Vision’. Heaney’s specific reference to Ficino’s image also makes some sense of the cryptic suggestion that ‘shape-note language’ can still ‘command him’: Ficino sought to reproduce in music the Neoplatonic schemata of heavenly order running through the corporeal world.<sup>8</sup> In ‘The Government of the Tongue’, Heaney states the aim of *all* art in terms that are strikingly similar to Ficino’s: ‘Art is not an inferior reflection of some ordained heavenly system but a rehearsal of it in earthly terms’ (*GT* 94). The poet was evidently attracted, as this and ‘Alphabets’ shows, to the aesthetics and principles which seek knowledge of the whole and ‘not just single things’.

In ‘The Riddle’, Heaney shows that he has committed, in *The Haw Lantern*, to treading a negative aesthetic path which is not really negative at all, but an affirmation of the whole and ‘not just single things’ *through* negative statements and images. The poem’s

<sup>5</sup> Marsilio Ficino, *Opera Omnia*, quoted in Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and The Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1964), pp. 75-76.

<sup>6</sup> Rand Brandes, “‘Letter by Strange Letter’: Yeats, Heaney, and the Aura of the Book”, p. 39. See also Rand Brandes, “‘Inscribed in Sheets’: Seamus Heaney’s Scribal Matrix”. *Seamus Heaney: The Shaping Spirit*, edited by Catharine Molloy and Phyllis Carey (Newark University of Delaware Press, 1996), pp. 47-70.

<sup>7</sup> Alessandro G. Farinella, ‘Giordano Bruno: Neoplatonism and the Wheel of Memory in the “De Umbris Idearum”’, trans. Carole Preston, *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 2 (Summer, 2002), pp. 596-624, p. 596.

<sup>8</sup> Alessandro G. Farinella, ‘Giordano Bruno: Neoplatonism and the Wheel of Memory in the “De Umbris Idearum”’, p. 597.

central metaphor is a sieve, which allows Heaney to evoke circular philosophical questions about his new aesthetic approach to enlightenment: ‘What would be better, what sticks or what falls through? | Or does the choice itself create the value?’ (*HL* 51). The poem ends, as its title suggests, in this vein:

Legs apart, deft-handed, start a mime  
To sift the sense of things from what’s imagined

And work out what was happening in that story  
Of the man who carried water in a riddle.

Was it culpable ignorance, or was it rather  
A *via negativa* through drops and let-downs? (*HL* 51)

The poem is about effective methods of sifting and conveying a sense of divinity. Helen Vendler has examined what she determines to be the Catholic aspects of Heaney’s thought which stimulate this identification with the tenets of negative theology. For Vendler, Heaney employs ‘culpable ignorance’ out of fear that ‘he may, in his present disbelief, avoid the question of value entirely’.<sup>9</sup> It is this which draws the poet, Vendler argues, towards the ‘compelling notion’ of *via negativa*, offering her own interpretation of the term: ‘In “negative theology” one can know God only by the ‘negative way’ of saying what He is not: He cannot die, He cannot suffer, He cannot change, He cannot do evil, and so on’ (ibid). In this definition of faith, Vendler concludes, ‘one adheres to piety by rejecting the false rather than by ascertaining the true’ (ibid). At first this seems coherent in its grasp of *via negativa*, but once we factor in its Christian overtones it is inherently self-contradictory when applied to ‘The Riddle’. The poet, as Vendler notes in this context and elsewhere in her book, does not believe in the God of Biblical revelation; yet her definition falls rigidly within the Christian form of *via negativa*, which is predicated on the existence of an anthropomorphic Creator. The major limitation of Vendler’s line of argument comes from this failure to differentiate

<sup>9</sup> Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 121.

between culpable and ‘*vincible*’ ignorance: Catholicism uses the latter term, while the former is more often found in the realms of moral philosophy. By *not* using the word ‘*vincible*’ Heaney is deliberately divesting both terms—culpable ignorance and *via negativa*—of Catholic connotations.

Given his disbelief in the Catholic deity and his attraction to Ficino’s metaphysics, it could be said that Heaney’s *via negativa* is more appropriately understood within the Neoplatonic context in which it has its origins. Christian mystics modified for their own theological purposes the principles of Neoplatonism, the most illustrative example of which can be found in Augustine’s *Confessions*: ‘I entered even into my inward self. Thou being my Guide, and able I was, for Thou wert become my Helper’.<sup>10</sup> This is an inspired inversion of Plotinus’ *Enneads*: ‘Now call up your confidence; you need a guide no longer; strain and see’.<sup>11</sup> In this modification lies all the distance, as one observer has noted, between Christian and Neoplatonic mysticism: the Christian mystic appeals to God, but the Neoplatonist pursues a *via negativa* founded on ‘a dialectal process in which the One—the transcendent source of all existence—plays no part; if it “appears”, it is not in the sense of revealing itself. It remains within itself, extraneous and indifferent to all that comes after it’.<sup>12</sup> Ficino, the source of Heaney’s ‘necromancer’ in ‘Alphabets’, was enthralled by Plotinus’s philosophy, and he espoused this Neoplatonism as a mode of self-transcendence: after calling to man to ‘separate his soul from his body’, he invites one to ‘seek yourself beyond the world’.<sup>13</sup> Heaney seeks liberation, like Plotinus and Ficino, from the constrained perception that

<sup>10</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, VII. X. 16 (Andover: Warren F. Smith; Boston: Gould and Lincoln; New York: John Wiley; Philadelphia: Smith, English & Co, 1860), p. 162

<sup>11</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads* trans. Stephen McKenna (London: Faber & Faber, 1969), pp. 63-64.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Henry, ‘Structure and Vocabulary of the Mystical Experience in Plotinus’, *Enneads* trans. Stephen McKenna (London: Faber & Faber, 1969), p. lxxvii.

<sup>13</sup> Marsilio Ficino, *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino: Vol. 1* (London: Shepherd-Walwyn, 1975), pp. 164-165.

fragments reality into single things, something that (irritatingly for a poet) writing tends to do.

## 6.2. Emptiness in ‘Clearances’

Heaney’s internalization of emptiness—the constituent absence which underlies all things—can be traced in ‘Clearances’, a sequence of eight sonnets written in memory of his mother who died in 1984. The poems are prefaced by three stanzas which describe how Heaney’s mother taught him to break coal by striking it at the right angle, imagery which serves as an introduction to the poet’s ambitions for the elegy: ‘*Teach me now to listen, | To strike it rich behind the linear black*’, that the passive mode of listening is crucial, and that writing itself (‘the linear black’) can actually get in the way. Having said this, along the way he comes up with some of the most concrete historical images in his oeuvre. In the well-known third sonnet, potatoes fall like ‘solder weeping off the soldering iron’ and gleam in a ‘bucket of clear water’, with the splashes of water stirring the mother and son’s ‘senses’; a similar domestic scene occurs in the fifth sonnet, in which he describes, in scrupulously literal terms, folding bed sheets; the sixth sonnet tours a church where he is seated with his mother at the front of a church during an Easter Mass and dwells on the paraphernalia of the ritual, closing with the sharp pitch of a psalmist’s ‘outcry taken up with pride’. All of these images are charged with palpable emotional warmth, but Heaney’s spiritual lessons from his mother’s death seem to be condensed into the last two poems of the sequence.

The seventh sonnet of ‘Clearances’ is the first to employ the spatial metaphor implied by the title of the sequence and arouses a sense of irrevocability about Heaney’s recognition that his art will be hereafter underpinned by absences. But the poem achieves this feeling by registering an equal sense of surprise in the immediate moments before and after the poet’s mother passes away. His father bends to her in ‘the last minutes and said more to her | Almost than in all their life together’ (HL 31); through these simple actions the Heaney siblings, the

poet recalls, were ‘overjoyed’. This bittersweet elation is made more poignant still by the way in which the father’s words of ‘good’ and ‘girl’ and his pleas against the inevitable are followed by the obliterating disclosure: ‘Then she was dead’ (*HL* 38). Earlier in the sequence an intrusive priest says prayers for the dying mother, but now there is only the implied presence of a doctor who abandons the search for a ‘pulsebeat’ and leaves everyone to ‘know one thing by being there’ (*HL* 31). It is at this point in the poem that Heaney shifts from a historical and concrete documentary of the past to the symbolic dimension:

The space we stood around had been emptied  
Into us to keep, it penetrated  
Clearances that suddenly stood open.  
High cries were felled and a pure change happened. (*HL* 31)

In this spatial metaphor he evokes sweeping ‘clearances’ of forests that now seem to be indicative of future aesthetic landscapes, and the event of ‘pure change’ evokes the shedding of mortal remains and becoming a pure soul returning to the transcendent source.

Heaney widens the scope of his spiritual concerns in the last sonnet of ‘Clearances’, the imagery of which reflects his need to revise the concept of absence which had informed ‘Station Island’. The poem begins by re-introducing a spatial metaphor from the Lough Derg pilgrimage: ‘I thought of walking round and round a space | Utterly empty, utterly a source’ (*HL* 32). Canto III uses these exact terms, but ends with an image of the rotted corpse of Heaney’s childhood pet dog (*SI* 68). Now, the poet shifts this ‘source’ to the gap where a tree once stood to mark his birth, and his mind is obviously tuned to a higher spiritual frequency:

Deep planted and long gone, my coeval  
Chestnut from a jam jar in a hole,  
Its heft and hush become a bright nowhere,  
A soul ramifying and forever  
Silent, beyond silence listened for. (*HL* 32)

The decomposition of mortal remains has been replaced by an emphasis on the scent of the purified soul, accompanied by the eternal silence of nothingness. The quality of spiritual aspiration alive in this sonnet can be gleaned from Heaney’s 1985 lecture, ‘The Placeless

Heaven: Another Look at Kavanagh'. There the poet speaks of Kavanagh's conscious move away from the 'world of ego', his apprehension of the Self, and his non-literary commitment to 'an abandonment of a life in order to find more abundant life' (*GT* 12). This language befits the Buddhist conception of *Śūnyatā*, the removal of ontological features of substance that living beings of ego mistakenly superimpose upon phenomena, an idea which is also notably expressed in *Tao Te Ching*:

Empty your mind of all thoughts.  
Let your heart be at peace.  
Watch the turmoil of beings,  
but contemplate their return.

Each separate being in the universe  
returns to the common source.  
Returning to the source is serenity.<sup>14</sup>

In the last scene of 'Clearances' Heaney figuratively returns the 'source' glimpsed in *Station Island* and finds serenity in learning that the ultimate reality of nature *is* death and absence, but death and absence as not so much abandonment of life as oneness and abundance.

Heaney's appreciation of emptiness as the nature of reality finds further expression in 'The Wishing Tree', a separate elegy for his mother which also employs tree symbolism to characterize the abandonment of a world conceived as 'single things' and entry into a spacious continuum. Lifted 'root and branch, to heaven', the tree sheds all the coins and nails and pins that have driven into it as an expression of superstitions in hope of otherworldly guidance, the debris of which comes 'streaming from it like a comet-tail | New minted and dissolved' (*HL* 36). The comet simile recalls 'Exposure', as well as Rilke's 'Orpheus': 'A tree ascended there. O pure transcendence!' <sup>15</sup> But the specific defiance of gravity here seems to be connected to Heaney's heightened appreciation of Kavanagh's later 'weightlessness'.

<sup>14</sup> Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, 16, trans. Stephen. Mitchell. <<http://taoteching.org.uk/chapter16.html>> [accessed September 2018]

<sup>15</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, 'First Part', *Sonnets to Orpheus*, trans. J.B. Leishman (London: The Hogarth Press, 1936, rep. 1949), p. 35.



The poem concludes with a ‘vision’ of ‘an airy branch-head rising through damp cloud, | Of turned up faces where the tree had stood’ (*HL* 36). In this out-of-body experience, Heaney proceeds to a new plane in his reinterpretation of absence, striking out further away still from decomposition in *Station Island* and towards a space of potential, the ‘bright nowhere’ inaugurated by ‘Clearances’. As the reader’s eye catches the vertigo-inducing sight of human faces, it is difficult not to feel like we are floating adrift with the tree. More than just description, Heaney manages to stimulate the *sensation* of emptiness, evoking the obliteration of our sense that things have an intrinsic nature. Heaney’s empty eyeballs here, to appropriate Yeats’s famous line, feel that knowledge increases unreality.<sup>16</sup>

### 6.3. Seeking ‘Proof and Wonder’

Aside from the recognition of emptiness, Heaney’s approach to enlightenment in this volume is also driven by spiritual desire. In ‘The Disappearing Island’, one of the parable poems of the volume, Heaney plays upon the myth of St Brendan the Abbot, who discovered an island on which to live and work only for the land to reveal itself as a sea-monster. In Heaney’s version, there is no fantastic creature; instead the ground simply vanishes (‘The island broke beneath us like a wave’):

The land sustaining us seemed to hold firm  
Only when we embraced it *in extremis*.  
All I believe that happened there was vision. (*HL* 54)

Heaney, as we have earlier noted, explained this image in clear terms in the Ellmann lectures, claiming it attempts to evoke two opposing truths: that the vision is purely hallucination and unreliably subjective, and that it should be credited because it is a self-generated dream that transcends familiar life and ‘commands the assent of awakened imagination’ (*PW* 55). Heaney encourages his readers to see the latter as the more commendable truth, identifying it

<sup>16</sup> W.B. Yeats, ‘The Statues’, *Collected Poems*, pp. 375-376, p. 375.

with Yeats's effort to overbear the pig of a world and write imaginative realities (ibid). The same themes are addressed by 'A Shooting Script', which employs cinematic techniques to portray an Ireland moving towards a unified cultural and religious identity that will 'never be' (HL 45), thus denoting the disappointment of sociocultural aspirations. In its concluding image, however, the speaker locates in an unexpected final tableau a surprising source of fascination:

And just when it looks like it's all over—  
Tracking shots of a long wave up a strand  
That breaks towards the point of a stick writing and writing  
Words in the old script in the running sand. (HL 45)

On one level this is a celebration of the Irish language ('the old script'), but the way in which this person persists with writing reflects the poet's ongoing desire for expression of the ineffable despite the inevitability of failure. Decidedly removed from society, this unidentified person recalls Jesus drawing a line in the sand, a biblical image which Heaney described as a metaphor for poetry in his lecture 'The Government of the Tongue'. The scribes and Pharisees bring to Jesus a woman taken 'in adultery, in the very act' and ask him to judge whether she should be punished under Moses' law, but Jesus stoops down, 'and with his finger wrote on the ground, as though he heard them not'.<sup>17</sup> Heaney describes this as a correlative of poetry's need to break from usual modes of thinking and expression without absconding from reality: in the disjunction between time's onward march and short-term human aspirations, he argues, poetry holds attention, like Jesus's writing on the ground, 'for a space, [and it] functions not as a distraction but as a pure concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back on ourselves' (GT 108). Heaney is holding his attention, and seems tantalized by the process of enlightenment if he embraces his visions *in extremis*.

<sup>17</sup> John 8: 1-11

Anticipatory desire of this kind extends to the cerebral scenes of another parable poem, ‘The Mud Vision’, in which Heaney creates a counter-apparition in a fictional Irish midlands whose population reflects a generational shift from theological belief to a secular agnosticism residually tinged by the workings of a religious collective unconscious. The opening stanza scans over a recognisable contemporary Ireland and its sites of pilgrimage such as Knock: holy statues in alcoves, modern cities of restaurants and graffiti, hares flitting underneath jets, and television screens airing the ‘blessings of popes’ (*HL* 48), the last of which is perhaps a reference to Pope John Paul II, who, in his visit to Ireland in 1979, wooed Irish audiences and created extraordinary fanfare (the television journalists gathered to see him in the assembly hall in the Dominican Convent in Dublin, for instance, twice burst into spontaneous renditions of ‘For He’s A Jolly Good Fellow!’).<sup>18</sup> There are two directions of travel in the cultural imagination in this first stanza: one is pulled forwards by progress and time towards modernity, the other is pulled backwards by the sense that something has been lost; the speaker claims that he and his fellow citizens have tested ‘native models’ and ‘the last of the mummers’ for evidence that will corroborate the communal aspiration, as he will later put it in the poem, to be proven ‘beyond expectation’ (*HL* 48-49). But when the speaker suggests that this community is also watching itself ‘at a distance’, and compares them in the last lines to ‘a man on a springboard | Who keeps limbering up because he cannot dive’ (*HL* 48), it confirms our initial suspicion that this poem will chart a general lack of conviction, an unwillingness to take a spiritual plunge.

This sense of a collective religious unconscious heading towards a secular worldview is countered—and indeed complicated—by the apparition of a strange symbol in the sky in the second stanza:

<sup>18</sup> See ‘A Song for the Pope 1979’, *RTE Archives* <<http://www.rte.ie/archives/2014/0929/648641-journalists-sing-to-pope-on-irish-visit>> [accessed May 2018]

And then in the foggy midlands it appeared,  
Our mud vision, as if a rose window of mud  
Had invented itself out of the glittery damp,  
A gossamer wheel, concentric with its own hub  
Of nebulous dirt, sullied yet lucent.  
We had heard of the sun standing still and the sun  
That changed colour, but we were vouchsafed  
Original clay, transfigured and spinning. (HL 48)

Within the fictional scheme of the poem, the imagined population seem to have had their religious intimations unexpectedly ratified only to return to the secular world. One thing which may come to mind for readers is the distinction between this vision and the ‘comet’s pulsing rose’ in ‘Exposure’: where the comet was real (but, in the poem, missed), the vision is imaginary (but, in the poem, seen). Vendler rejects this fiction as illogical, feeling irked by the use of heavenly language in the context of the world.<sup>19</sup> This seems like it is missing the point, but the speaker’s conclusions in the poem might also constitute an analogous rejection of the mud wheel’s veracity: he describes how it eventually disappears from its place in the sky and in its wake ‘experts’ examine and take ownership of the phenomenon with their interpretive technology and ‘*post factum* jabber’ (HL 49). The possibilities of the vision have been lost in the hard realities of a media-driven world, and the ‘one chance to know the incomparable’ and feel ‘convinced and estranged’ has, in the speaker’s view, passed forever (HL 49). Even within the fiction, Heaney’s mud vision is redundant, which leads to the conclusion that it has no significant meaning other than a further affirmation of what the speaker elsewhere implicitly describes as ‘the folly’ of religious aspirations (HL 49). There may well be enough evidence in this poem to argue that the speaker merely appears to be partially deluding himself, for the sake of tribal unity, into believing he is anti-media and anti-modernity while actually giving in to the inevitable authority of secular contemporary society. Yet Heaney himself felt differently about what he would describe as the reality of the

<sup>19</sup> Helen Vendler, ‘Second Thoughts’, *New York Time Book Review*, 28 April 1988, p. 44.

inner experience symbolised by the wheel in the sky—a divine intervention like Constantine’s ‘IN HOC SIGNO’ in ‘Alphabets’—in the weird landscape of ‘The Mud Vision’. He described in Jungian terms how this visionary wheel came from ‘a significant writing experience’ after his ‘preconscious’ was stimulated by Richard Long’s *Rosc* exhibition in Dublin in 1984, a display of concentric circles high up on white-washed wall, with each of the circles made up of muddy hand prints.<sup>20</sup> For Heaney, Long’s work was ‘like a heavenly visitation’, what the poet described as ‘an apparition of the immanent rather than the transcendent’ and whose authenticity ran counter to the bogus apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Ireland in the 1950s.<sup>21</sup> He claimed that imagining Long’s mud prints in the sky was indeed an experience ‘every bit as numinous’ as the orthodox religious conviction in that of Mary’s apparition, and felt compelled to produce an artistic representation of his unconscious. He associated his idea with Eamon de Valera’s political ‘dream of transforming the local customs and folk Catholicism of rural Ireland in the middle of the twentieth century into something more self-conscious and purposeful’ (ibid., 11-12). For de Valera, in twentieth-century Ireland the ‘material [had] usurped the sovereignty that is the right of the spiritual’; ‘Spirit and mind have ceased to rule. The riches which the world sought, and to which it sacrificed all else, have become a curse by their very abundance’.<sup>22</sup> Heaney was in a position to see how spiritual values continued to deteriorate in Ireland, describing, in 1990, a contemporary ‘spiritual crisis’ and ‘lack of metaphysical certitude’ every bit as desperate as the historical era evoked in the poem.<sup>23</sup> There is an intellectual and spiritual hunger spinning

<sup>20</sup> Heaney mistakenly records the date of Long’s exhibition as 1986 in Seamus Heaney, ‘The Frontier of Writing’, in Jacqueline Genet and Wynne Hellegourac’h (ed), *Irish Writers and their Creative Process* (Gerards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1996), pp. 3-16, p. 10. *Rosc* was a series of exhibitions of international art that took place approximately every four years between 1966 and 1988. Long contributed twice to the event, in 1977 and 1984. See: [http://www.imma.ie/en/downloads/timeline\\_rosc\\_final\\_version.pdf](http://www.imma.ie/en/downloads/timeline_rosc_final_version.pdf). [accessed January 2018].

<sup>21</sup> Seamus Heaney, ‘The Frontier of Writing’, p. 10-11.

<sup>22</sup> Eamon de Valera, quoted in *Speeches and Statements by Eamon de Valera 1917-1973* edited by Maurice Moynihan (Dublin: Gill, 1980), p. 471.

<sup>23</sup> Seamus Heaney, ‘Keeping Time: Irish Poetry and Contemporary Society’, p. 260.

Heaney's sky-wheel, one which will remain unextinguished until his imagery here is revisited by 'Wheels within Wheels' in *Seeing Things*, tapping into the constituent energies of reality to enter 'an orbit coterminous with longing' (*ST* 46).

Heaney's spiritual desire for unity of vision is perhaps most engagingly evidenced by 'Hailstones', a poem which demonstrates in self-reflexive terms the disappointments of book learning but, with its imagery and reference to Thomas Traherne, irradiates the qualities of desire and susceptibility to the numinous which will define *Seeing Things*. Beginning with the experience of the 'sudden' onrush of hailstones, Heaney evokes the sensation of becoming aware of the shower by being hit on the cheek. This introduces the central metaphor of the poem, with the speaker comparing hailstones gathered in his hand to writing 'out of the melt of the real thing | smarting into its absence' (*HL* 14). In these opening lines, he expresses the limited capacity of language. In this sense of 'disallowance' there is clearly some awareness of what the poet called the 'challenge' presented by Deconstruction—the philosophical outlook that emphasises that words always defer meaning—which permeated, Heaney recalled, the academic circles in which he moved in America in the 1980s (*SS* 287), and the metaphor of the poem has been interpreted as the epitome of his intellectual assent to its tenets. For Henry Hart, the poem charts 'its own genesis and deconstructive journey': 'A self-conscious artefact, it traces the author's troubled, self-conscious relationship with all authorities, including himself'.<sup>24</sup> The cultural 'discriminations' in this poem, Hart argues, are 'literally their own undoing. They impel the poem toward a denouement, an untying of the very discriminations that are knotted (or, as it turns out, frozen) in language from which it is made'.<sup>25</sup> But Hart misses the overtones of mystical anticipation in the poem's imagery:

Nipple and hive, bite lumps,  
small acorns of the almost pleasurable  
intimated and disallowed

<sup>24</sup> Henry Hart, *Seamus Heaney*, pp. 189-190.

<sup>25</sup> Henry Hart, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 189.

when the shower ended  
and everything said *wait*.  
For what? For forty years

to say there, there you had  
the truest foretaste of your aftermath—  
in that dilation

when the light opened in silence  
and a car with wipers going still  
laid perfect tracks in the slush. (*HL* 15)

Like 'The Mud Vision', the shower excites in the speaker a spiritual longing reflected in the impulse to wait for illumination; the transformative effect is feeling 'the truest foretaste of your aftermath', an experience of the ineffable silence and expansion of dilated light which affirms the transience of the self. There is a symbolic cleansing in this 'almost pleasurable' pain of impact which induces clarity, one which is reflected in the subsequent cleared surfaces made by the windscreen wipers and the wheel tracks. As in 'Clearances', emptied space and dilatation of gleaming brightness constitutes the broader landscape, but there are also intimations of the heavenly ice being tainted by earthly ground: while the poet's mother returned to pure soul, there are hailstones here which turn to contaminated slush and only remain, like the stuff caught in the sieve of 'The Riddle', visible reminders of what continues to escape the poet's grasp: the transcendental dimension of reality. So not only does the 'real thing' elude the poet, he is also conscious of debasing it with the limited sources of linguistic tools at his disposal, an awareness shared by those of the apophatic tradition: the poet has momentarily felt the collapse of distinctions, but he has been forced to translate the fusion of subject and object in language of this world.<sup>26</sup> In this disjunction of self and cosmos, Heaney still feels the spiritual desire.

<sup>26</sup> Louis MacNeice, 'Introductory', *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (London: Faber and Faber, 1941), pp. 24-25.

Couched between the images of absence and evanescence in parts ‘I’ and ‘III’ of ‘Hailstones’, the second section of the poem offers a clear expression of this desire to overcome this linguistic block between the self and the transcendent. In the ‘brats of showers’ a classroom window becomes a screen of flashing white, with the speed and trajectory of the hailstones compared, as noted above, to a ruler struck across children’s knuckles, and there is an emphasis on the chemical transition from perfect shapes to ‘in no time dirty slush’ (*HL* 14). With sensuality occupying all this space in the text, the next step of Heaney’s imaginative association is particularly significant in its implications for how we can interpret the impetus of desire latent in this poem:

Thomas Traherne had his orient wheat  
for proof and wonder

but for us, it was the sting of hailstones  
and the unstingable hands of Eddie Diamond  
foraging in the nettles. (*HL* 14-15)

The engaging question here is surely concerned with discerning why Heaney’s mind immediately jumps to comparisons with Traherne’s *Centuries*: ‘The corn was orient and immortal wheat, which never should be reaped, nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from everlasting to everlasting’.<sup>27</sup> Traherne felt corrupted by learning (‘the dirty devices of this world’), and wanted to ‘unlearn, and become, as it were, a little child again that I may enter into the Kingdom of God’ (*ibid*). Heaney is not just *comparing* this to his own childhood experience (Eddie Diamond lived near Mossbawn),<sup>28</sup> he is drawing an *equivalent*: Traherne bears witness to the immensity of cosmic unity and of eternity glimpsed in time, and it is this irrepressible sense of wonder plagued by adult corruption which Heaney tells us that he too experiences. The abstracted distance which this involves here raises another

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Traherne, ‘The Third Century’, *Centuries of Meditations*, edited by Bertram Dobell (London: B. Dobell, pp. 157-158.

<sup>28</sup> Eugene Kielt, *Tours of Heaney Country*, Magherafelt. 10 January 2017.



fruitful comparison with Traherne that distinguishes the absence of 'Hailstones' from the Buddhist acceptance of emptiness as the primary constituent of reality in 'Clearances' and 'The Wishing Tree': in 'Hailstones', there is an attraction to being tantalized like Traherne, who preferred to feel the pangs of a 'restless longing' which 'never could be satisfied' and 'did incessantly a Paradice | Unknown suggest, and something undescried | Discern, and bear me to it'.<sup>29</sup> It was this feeling of desire which inspired Traherne, as one critic noted, to 'blur the frontier between the sensible and the spiritual, investing the sensation with a glory of its own'.<sup>30</sup> While evanescence predominates in the aesthetic of 'Hailstones', it is this sensation and feeling of spiritual aspiration to which it ultimately appeals. It also reflects a the mind which has been seeking enlightenment through the middle phase of work: we have seen Heaney chase intimations in the Glanmore sonnets in *Field Work*, thirst for the numinous in 'Sweeney Redivivus', and we shall see that the 'Squarings' poems of *Seeing Things* are characterised by playful tantalization.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Traherne, 'Desire', *The Poetical Works of Thomas Traherne* (London: B. Dobell, 1906), pp. 119-122, p. 119.

<sup>30</sup> 'Robert Ellrodt, 'Thomas Traherne: Sensual Idealism', *Seven Metaphysical Poets: A Structural Study of the Unchanging Self* (Oxford: oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 273-289, p. 274.

## 7. 'Everything Flows': Enlightened Perception in *Seeing Things*

Heaney's eighth major volume of poetry, *Seeing Things*, ratifies the primacy of perception in what has come to seem like the *annus mirabilis* of this poet's aesthetics of enlightenment. The transformative impetus of the book was recognised by critics from the outset. 'Reading these poems', John Carey enthused in an early review, 'you feel what the first readers, say, of Keats or Milton's 1645 collection must have felt—the peculiar excitement of watching a new masterwork emerge and take its permanent place in our literature'.<sup>1</sup> For Carey, the book shows that Heaney is eager for 'change': while the sensuous and factual nature of earlier work survives in the poems, Carey argues, the thirst for 'unreality' is unfamiliar and dominant, a plea for an escape from the tangible (*ibid*). In 1998, Helen Vendler recorded similar first reactions: 'It was a great surprise to many of Heaney's readers', she recalls, 'to come upon the abstract, unmythologized and mostly unpolitical hieroglyphs of *Seeing Things*'.<sup>2</sup> Yet if the book is borne of the desire for 'change,' it isn't for the reason outlined by Carey, and if it is 'surprising', it isn't for the reason given by Vendler. The change in this volume is that it not only moves beyond the scrupulous realism Carey so cherishes in Heaney, but that it also demonstrates a fundamental alteration in the poet's attitude towards the idea of the transcendent. *Field Work*, *Station Island*, and *The Haw Lantern* each operate on a faith in methodically directed aesthetic approaches to an ever-elusive transcendental dimension; *Seeing Things*, rather than searching and grasping for 'Somewhere, well out, beyond...' (*FW* 24), moves into a mode of perception rooted in the wholeness and depth of reality. The surprising, revelatory aspect of the volume, I want to suggest, lies not in its more 'abstract' features or language, but in its intensely embodied evocation of features central to

<sup>1</sup> John Carey, 'Touching the void', *Sunday Times*, 2 June 1991, p. [1][S4]. *The Sunday Times Historical Archive* <<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/FP1802816854/STHA?u=univulster&sid=STHA&xid=05cfb8ef>> [accessed December 2017]

<sup>2</sup> Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 150.

the dynamics of enlightened perception: a vivid awareness of three-dimensional space; conscious occupation of the Eternal Now; and an apprehension of Heraclitean flux—the knowledge that everything flows.

Of the critical responses to *Seeing Things*, Daniel Tobin's perhaps comes closest to a comprehensive assessment of its central spiritual theme of enlightened perception. Drawing on the Japanese philosopher Keiji Nishitani's *Religion and Nothingness*, Tobin compares Heaney's aesthetic in this book to the Buddhist tenet of Śūnyatā. 'Selfness and the self-identity of things', Tobin argues, 'does not emerge [in the volume] as a matter of the self-assertion of the thing, but rather through the realisation that such self-assertive self-identity is illusory'.<sup>3</sup> Tobin stresses that Heaney is not embracing the Buddhist Eightfold Path, nor any single mode of philosophy, but he nevertheless enjoins us to see the concerns of 'ontology and cosmology' as a matter of course in this part of the poet's 'spiritual quest' (ibid., 262). Heaney is at home in the paradox that the world is both ground and flow, in Tobin's view, at once Platonic Forms and Heraclitean Fire: 'In finding himself within the road of flow he envisions a world in which each thing is most closely related to everything else by virtue of the impermanence of the all' (ibid., 263). Tobin also detects the 'ontological significance of play' in this aesthetic presentation of reality, noting images of apparently arbitrary preoccupations and childhood games which fulfil the criteria of 'sacred time' of ecstasy, freedom and surprise. Tobin is right to argue that a transformative view of reality is made manifest in *Seeing Things*: namely, the 'beatitude of being', as the poet himself described it in 1991.<sup>4</sup> This chapter will seek to more clearly illustrate what this means in practice in the poems. The first section offers a brief examination of Heaney's rejection of ego-centred perception and gross realism in the revelatory images of 'The Skylight' and 'Fosterling'. The

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Tobin, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 261.

<sup>4</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in Melvyn Bragg, *The South Bank Show*, Season 15, Ep. 6, London Weekend Television, 27 October 1991.

second section adopts a thematic approach to ‘Markings’, a paradigmatic poem that displays the three intrinsic features of enlightenment that I have suggested are characteristic of the volume: experience of three-dimensional space, intuitive apprehension—with intimations of foreknowledge—of the Eternal Now, and the status of Heraclitean flux. The third section applies this approach to the volume as a whole in order to reach an original, if paradoxical conclusion about its place in the poet’s psychic and spiritual development: *Seeing Things* marks the end of Heaney’s *quest*, with the dynamic of tantalised seeking and the evocation of mysteries will be broadly replaced by one of more passive contemplation and acceptance of what is.

### 7.1. Crediting Marvels

The sense of unexpected revelation that characterises Heaney’s evocation of enlightening moments in *Seeing Things* is a dominant feature of ‘The Skylight’, in which he draws on autobiographical events and biblical imagery to convey his private feelings of transformation. The poem recalls Marie installing a skylight when her husband was off teaching in America, a radical roof modification which did not have the poet’s prior approval. However, it appears to have been revelatory:

But when the slates came off, extravagant  
Sky entered and held surprise wide open.  
For days I felt like an inhabitant  
Of that house where the man sick of the palsy  
Was lowered through the roof, had his sins forgiven,  
Was healed, took up his bed and walked away. (ST 37)

This self-portrait of miraculous disclosure also is offered with the wry self-effacement by which the poet sidesteps accusations of egotism in a book where he more than once uses such imagery of rebirth and personal conversion; Heaney seems to have anticipated, for instance, Paul Muldoon’s remark that, in *Seeing Things*, ‘the great physician of the earth | is waxing

metaphysical'.<sup>5</sup> But in this poem, there is also an unequivocal, earnest embracing of revelation; the speaker finds himself suddenly receptive to a new perspective on the world and one's place in it. His vision of light and space is infused with spiritual value through the reference to the New Testament parable of the paralytic healed by Jesus (Matthew 9:1–8; Mark 2:1–12; Luke 5:17–26). In this lies the understanding that cut 'beatitude of being' depends on going beyond an artificially constrained perspective on reality, a state of higher consciousness which *philosophia perennis* identifies as the self-abnegation needed for enlightenment: having realised 'the self is the Self', as the *Maitrayana Upanishad* puts it, 'a man achieves selflessness; and in virtue of selflessness he is to be conceived as unconditioned'.<sup>6</sup> In his imagery of miraculous healing, spatial dimensions, and broadening horizons, Heaney shows himself newly aware of the benefits of an 'unconditioned' approach to reality: his humour and willed susceptibility to the possibility of revelation contrast to the desire for experience of the world on limited ego-centric terms.

This conversion also provides the impetus to 'Fosterling', where Heaney, eschewing naïve realism and its attendant consequence of mistaking appearances for truth, proposes an insouciant mysticism. In the poem, he associates his once 'loved' imagery of realism with 'Heaviness of being', describing it as 'sluggish in the doldrums of what happens'. He gently reproaches himself for taking so long to trust his own spiritual convictions:

Me waiting until I was nearly fifty  
 To credit marvels. Like the tree-clock of tin cans  
 The tinkers made. So long for air to brighten,  
 Time to be dazzled and the heart to lighten. (*ST* 50)

An early draft of the poem shows that this last line was initially concerned with intellectual predilections: rather than 'the heart', Heaney's speaker says it is time for 'the mind to

<sup>5</sup> Paul Muldoon, *The Prince of the Quotidian* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1994), p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, p. 236.

lighten'.<sup>7</sup> So much changes with that substitution, namely that the intellect is replaced by the seat of emotions: the heart. The poem thus expresses an overdue relaxation and opening up to possibilities. This determines how we interpret Heaney's new intention to 'credit marvels'. Throughout *Seeing Things*, one can make a distinction between 'faith'—which Foster leans towards in his reading of the books—and 'belief', the latter term appearing prominently, as this chapter will consider, in 'Wheels within Wheels'. Hitherto, Heaney's 'faith' in the possibility of a transcendent dimension beyond the familiar had wrought deceptive projections, making him seek recourse to the aesthetic methods that characterise the previous three books in this middle section in the oeuvre. The form of 'belief' at work in *Seeing Things*, by contrast, involves a conscious giving of assent, followed by the delighted perception of the surprisingly marvellous nature of the world in which we live. Heaney's rejection of both mimetic realism and supernatural mysticism are what *Lankavatara Sutra* identifies as 'absolutely transcending all the categories constructed by the mind'.<sup>9</sup>

Revelation is also central to 'Lightenings, I', a scene of spiritual illumination which Heaney conceived in the National Library in Dublin where he had just completed an annotated selection of Yeats's poems. The sequence begins with a barren landscape irradiated by the numinous (SS 319):

Shifting brilliances. Then winter light  
In a doorway, and on the doorstep  
A beggar shivering in silhouette.

So the particular judgement might be set:  
Bare wallstead and a cold hearth rained into—  
Bright puddle where the soul-free cloud-life roams.

And after the commanded journey, what?  
Nothing magnificent, nothing unknown.  
A gazing out from far away, alone.

<sup>7</sup> MS 49,493|96.

<sup>8</sup> John Wilson Foster, 'Crediting Marvels: Heaney After 50', pp. 222-3.

<sup>9</sup> Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, p. 238.

And it is not particular at all,  
Just old truth dawning: there is no next-time-round.  
Unroofed scope. Knowledge-freshening wind. (ST 55)

According to its author, this poet, is about ‘being visited, about the capacity for illumination, splendour and elation’.<sup>10</sup> The winter light certainly recalls ‘The Cold Heaven’, as Heaney later observed: he was convinced that he was working in an ‘unconscious dialogue’ with Yeats’s poem.<sup>11</sup> He also claimed that the image emanated from a vision of a beggar at the threshold of this roofless cottage, a puddle of rain-water in its heart, and a high cold sky moving with clouds; the poet describes this as ‘an image of the soul being called to judgement on the brink of eternity’, the loneliness of which expanded and bewildered the consciousness of the child who was taught to expect it (ibid). In Catholic theology, the ‘particular judgement’ is the moment when each man ‘receives his eternal retribution in his immortal soul at the very moment of his death’.<sup>12</sup> But Heaney’s bold assertion that there is ‘no next-time-round’, with the bare landscape and ‘soul-free clouds’ that intimate *dues absconditus*, clarifies his position on Christian eschatology: he does not believe in life after death. The capacity for enlightenment in the poem, then, is not about heavenly revelation, but fully awakened appreciation of the known world.

## 7.2. Space, Time, Flux: ‘Markings’

The three defining features of Heaney’s enlightened perspective in *Seeing Things* could be seen as apprehension of depth and wholeness, the cognizance of the eternal Now, and the metamorphic effects of discerning Heraclitean flux. All can be recognised in ‘Markings’ (ST 8-9). The three dimensions of space are first conveyed in this poem by the notional boxes,

<sup>10</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in Mike Murphy, ‘Seamus Heaney’, in *Reading the Future: Irish Writers in Conversation with Mike Murphy* edited by Clíodhna Ní Anluain (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2000), pp. 81-97, p. 90.

<sup>11</sup> Seamus Heaney, ‘Sixth Sense, Seventh Heaven’, *Dublin Review*, Issue 8. Autumn 2002  
<<https://thedublinreview.com/article/sixth-sense-seventh-heaven/>> [accessed June 2018]

<sup>12</sup> *The Catechism of the Catholic*, 1021.

lines and goalposts of the football pitch marked out by four jackets: the imagined touchlines for the children are ‘like longitude and latitude | Under the bumpy thistly ground’. In the second section of the poem these notional boundaries metamorphose into lines pegged in the garden, with a ‘spade nicking the first straight edge along | The tight white string’. In the same section the speaker further imagines a string ‘stretched out perfectly | To mark the outline of a house foundation’, followed by timber battens ‘set at right angles | For every corner’ similarly placed in ‘oddly passive grass’. In the concluding image in this second section of the invisible dimensions of surveyed space is ‘the imaginary line straight down a field of grazing’ from ‘the rod stuck in one headrig to the rod | Stuck in the other’. In the third and final stanza the coordinates of envisioned dimensions manifest when a ‘mower parted the bronze sea of corn’ (ST 8-9). This last reference to Moses parting the Red Sea endows a religious sense of sublimity upon the speaker’s apprehension of space in its wholeness: the invisible planes and depths of reality are evoked by conceptual lines in the poem. This is integral to enlightened perception in *Seeing Things*: the capacity to perceive three-dimensions is also the capacity to situate oneself in reality, to see oneself as part of the whole.

The realisation that life exists within an every-folding present, one which liberates consciousness from the tyranny of time, is also conveyed in the poem. In the first section, the boys playing football in darkness seem to escape the illusory restrictions of the temporal world:

It was quick and constant, a game that never need  
Be played out. Some limit had been passed,  
There was fleetness, furtherance, untiredness  
In time that was extra, unforeseen and free. (ST 8)

Heaney recalls a childhood memory in which he went beyond the ‘limit’ of living in chronological time; the game and the darkness combine to release the boys from constraints imposed by clock-consciousness; the boys from time; the individual ‘I’ passes from its ordinary constructs of self and time into the ultimate reality of unplayed-out present. The poet



muses on the nature and significance of this childhood experience in the third section of the poem when he draws upon the metaphor of the door:

All these things entered you  
As if they were both the door and what came through it.  
They marked the spot, marked time and held it open. (ST 9)

Historical time is forgotten and the eternal Now emerges as an ultimate metaphysical truth. Eugene O'Brien argues that Heaney's use of the door metaphor in this transition into the later period of his work embodies Roland Barthes' conception of poetic language as a tool with which to "open the door to all that stands above Nature".<sup>13</sup> In this case, O'Brien argues, description is revelation, because 'through the door the writer attempts to access an unknown world of feeling, sense, intuition, and the transcendent'. This seems a little generalised, but O'Brien is looking in the right area. Referring to the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, he suggests that this particular door emerges from pure concentration on the self and the dynamic process of summoning and releasing which does not "limit itself to distinguishing what is inside from what is outside but instead traces a threshold (the state of exception) between the two" (ibid., 357). The metaphor of the door no longer expresses Heaney's early fascination with psychological obscurity—the Jungian door into the dark— but Blake's immortal line, borrowed by Huxley for the title of his own record of intensified, sacramental vision: 'If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite'.<sup>14</sup> When, in 1991, Heaney offered a Blakean vision of art as giving us 'small truths' which 'partake of the quality of eternity', he indirectly described the perception of timelessness in this poem and others in *Seeing Things*.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Eugene O'Brien, 'The Door Stands Open': Liminal Spaces in Later Heaney', *The Soul Exceeds Its Circumstances': The Later Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, edited by E. O'Brien (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2016), pp. 348-369, p. 356.

<sup>14</sup> William Blake, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', *Poems of William Blake*, edited by W.B. Yeats (London: G Routledge & Sons, 1905), pp. 176-94, p. 185.

<sup>15</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'A Soul on the Washing Line', p. 124.

The doctrine of Heraclitean flux which underpins Heaney's perspective on matter and time in this volume is expressed in the final section of the poem by a vision of 'two men with a cross-cut' who:

kept it swimming  
Into a felled beach backwards and forwards  
So that they seemed to row the steady earth. (ST 9).

The 'ontological paradox' of flux—we cannot, as Heraclitus averred, step into the same river twice—is affirmed by this simile: the earth appears fixed and permanent, the speaker intimates, but his poetic insight is of flux between solid and liquid.<sup>16</sup> In this image, any realist conceptualisation of fixed phenomena not only appears inherently limited, but an obfuscation of fact. In *Seeing Things*, Heaney's mode of cleansed perception solves this disjunction between subjective observer and external reality: we are all part of the one, indissoluble flux.

### 7.3. Three-Dimensional Space

A new appreciation of the nature of three-dimensional space is central to the first section of the eponymous poem of *Seeing Things*. Heaney begins by recounting a childhood experience when he and other young boys climbed into a boat at Inishbofin in 'nervous twos and threes'; the poet himself was particularly afraid at the time, and it induced a transformative sensation of his own bodily space within the world:

I panicked at the shiftiness and heft  
Of the craft itself. What guaranteed us  
That quick response and buoyancy and swim  
Kept me in agony. All the time  
As we went sailing evenly across  
The deep, still, seeable-down-into water,  
It was as if I looked from another boat  
Sailing through air, far up, and could see  
How riskily we fared into the morning,  
And loved in vain our bare, bowed, numbered heads. (ST 16)

<sup>16</sup> Daniel Tobin, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 270.

The ‘deep, still, seeable-down-into water’ becomes the deep, *unseeable*-down-into coordinates of space: as the boat moves along the x-axis, Heaney’s sublime, out-of-body experience reveals the depth of space, the y-axis. The frailty of human flesh, after the *Psalms* (‘They have pierced my hands and feet; they have numbered all my bones’) might seem unnervingly apparent, but taken together with the three-dimensional imagery the poem exemplifies a central tenet of enlightened perception: embodied experience of space not only allows for apprehension of the physical and metaphysical tapestry of reality, but transcendence of the reductive, ego-centred view of oneself as an abstracted observer; it undermines attachment to the self and appearances which artificially fragment this interconnected whole of relations. The child, who—as an egotist—sees himself as separate, is unnerved by the instability of being in space, the rolling and pitching of reality. The adult, who discovers this apparently insecure dimension to be his natural home, now regards this ‘shiftiness’ as a ‘guarantee’.

Heaney’s programmatic aesthetic approach to depth—the unconditioned experience of being in space—is divided across poems ii and iii of ‘Lightenings’. In the former the poet enjoins himself to pursue embodied experience:

Take squarings from the recessed gable pane.  
 Make your study the unregarded floor.  
 .  
 Sink every impulse like a bolt. Secure  
 The bastion of sensation. Do not waver  
 Into language. Do not waver in it. (*ST* 56)

This poem seeks—like ‘Alphabets’ before it—unmediated ‘sensation’. The rhetorical conceit of poem iii is that the speaker anticipates questions raised about terms used to describe such ambitions. We now learn that ‘squarings’ are the motions you go through playing marbles, squaring up the angles ‘before you’d shoot’. The speaker admits that much of his aiming was ineffectual, a wish towards ‘blind certainties that were going to prevail | Beyond the one-off

moment of the pitch', but the conclusion of the poem emphasises the physiological calibrating experience of perception itself, the 're-envisagings':

A million million accuracies passed

Between your muscles' outreach and that space  
Marked with three round holes and a drawn line.  
You squinted out from a skylight of the world. (*ST* 57)

The human eye becomes a 'skylight of the world', which recasts the image of 'The Skylight' in Part One: whereas endless sky entered into the attic study, evoking the vast, external spaces of the world, this poem internalizes space and light behind the eyes. The poet also utilises the hand-eye coordination of the marble player: the poem allows one to envisage, like the player, the dimensions above and below, behind and before; in intuiting the volume and curvature of the marbles within space it collapses the disjunction between perceiving sensibility and objective reality.

The unconditioned experience of space is further explored in poem x of 'Squarings', the imagery of which juxtaposes perception with intellectual contemplation. The poem begins with sensuous imagery of overhanging grass and 'seedling birch' on a quarry face, with the second stanza opening it out into a vast three-dimensional image as the speaker surveys

Above and beyond and sumptuously across  
The water in its clear deep dangerous holes  
On the quarry floor. (*ST* 64)

The speaker is responsive to: the sheer volume of space that's framed by the quarry's contours, with a lack of punctuation makes the first of these lines telescopic. The first two stanzas convey the corporeal resonance of reality, and the speaker seems to recognise this when, turning to contemplate the scene, he uses the neologisms 'Ultimate | Fathomableness' and 'ultimate stony up-againstness'. Familiar language has been so outstripped by physical perception that a new material diction is required. The rhetorical questions of the poem— '[Could] you reconcile | What was diaphanous there with what was massive?', 'Were you

equal to or were you opposite | To build-ups so promiscuous and weightless?' (ST 64)—challenge both speaker and reader to engage with the paradox of defining our experiences of space. When, in the last line of the poem, he enjoins us to shield our eyes, 'look up and face the music', he reaches back towards the original scene, reinforcing this feeling that enlightened perception involves direct, embodied experience of three-dimensional space, not abstract contemplation of it; that the essence of space, as Heidegger said, 'cannot be conceived as the kind of Being which belongs to a *res extensa*'.<sup>17</sup>

The same structural pattern informs the depth-perception of 'Settings, xiii'. The first two stanzas of this poem evoke contours and spaces:

Hazel stealth. A trickle in the culvert.  
Athletic sealight on the doorstep slab,  
On the sea itself, on silent roofs and gables.

Whitewashed suntraps. Hedges hot as chimneys.  
Chairs on all fours. A plate-rack braced and laden.  
The fossil poetry of hob and slate. (ST 69)

These short sentences replicate the spontaneity of an eye scanning—or perhaps recalling in the mind's eye for a diary entry—surfaces and objects of this landscape bathed in light. Everywhere the eye is wooed, to borrow Heaney's earlier phrase in 'Bogland', into spatial dimensions. The speaker perceives the subterranean space of the culvert, a term which Heaney closely associated with Eliot's 'auditory imagination': 'It's got kind of *dark hole under the ground* within it. And stored in the system, in the big archive of every ear, there is a memory of a very thin trickle of water in a big, echoey underplace'.<sup>18</sup> 'The 'Athletic sealight' illuminates not only the slab of the doorstep, but the dimensions of the door, casting light on the vastness of the nearby sea itself and the height and breadth of the coastal houses,

<sup>17</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p. 147.

<sup>18</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in Steven Ratner, 'Seamus Heaney: The Words Worth Saying', *The Christian Science Monitor*, 7 October 1992 < <https://www.csmonitor.com/1992/1007/07161.html> > [accessed March 2019].

and taking the speaker around the tangled, dense bodies; the term ‘athletic’ also reminds us that reality is not just three-dimensional, but flowing, as I will explore in last section of this chapter. The reference to chairs on ‘all fours’ may be playful, but the description conveys the object in its dimensions as though it is crouching on the ground, ready to spring into action. The last two stanzas of the poem comment on the perception of depth. The speaker glosses the experience as one of ‘desire’, but it is unsatisfactory for the reader since this does not match up—cannot match up—to the intuitive experience stimulated by the first two stanzas:

Re-enter this as the adult of solitude  
The silence-forder and the definite  
presence you sensed withdrawing first time round. (ST 69)

‘Presence’ is certainly attained in the original scene, and it only withdraws when the speaker steps in here and invites intellectual reflection upon (and therefore obliteration of) the ‘first’ embodied experience.

#### **7.4. The Eternal Now**

The realisation in this volume of the eternal Now is the subject of ‘Settings, xxi’, where Heaney recovers a perennial truth expressed by Catholic theological vocabulary. The speaker recounts a memory of firing a rifle at a handkerchief pinned on a tree, the thrill of hitting the target (‘it exhilarated me’) giving him a ‘whole new quickened sense of what *rifle* meant’:

And then again as it was in the beginning  
I saw the soul snatched away  
  
Across dark galaxies and felt that shot  
For the sin it was against eternal life—  
Another phrase dilating in new light. (ST 77)

Theological terminology here (‘soul’ and ‘eternal life’) is reactivated to connote the sacredness and timelessness of life. The initial source of quickening surprise is the shock of the gun, but it leads to the revelatory moment of perceiving eternity in a ‘new light’. In this way, the poem can be compared to ‘Hailstones’, where there is a dilation ‘when the light

opened in silence'. Rather than silence, it is the Catholic term that glows in the poet's mind with fresh meaning, reflecting—like the opening poem of 'Lightenings—an insouciant attitude about the *mot juste* of spiritual terms.

Boyhood apprehension of timelessness informs 'Settings, xiv'', where Heaney draws upon time spent playing on railway tracks in Castledawson. The poem begins by recalling a specific moment in the past:

One afternoon I was seraph on gold leaf.  
I stood on the railway sleepers hearing larks,  
Grasshoppers, cuckoos, dogbarks, trainer planes

Cutting and modulating and drawing off.  
Heat wavered on the immaculate line  
And shine of the cogged rails. (*ST* 70)

This railway image has its precedent *Station Island's* 'The Railway Children', where the poet describes himself and his friends feeling as though they 'knew nothing worth knowing' despite having the capacity to 'stream through the eye of the needle' (*SI* 45). But 'Settings xiv' is inhabited by only one child, and in so doing Heaney realizes—as opposed to merely describing—the child's potential to lose track of time; the speaker relates how, on either side of the lines, daisies are static ('like vestals') and 'hot stones | Were clover-meshed and streaked with engine oil'; in these sensory experiences the speaker develops a trance-like state which edges into what Edna Longley, in another context, described as Heaney's capacity to convey 'a truly timeless zone'.<sup>19</sup> As the child stands still, so does time:

Nothing prevailed, whatever was in store  
Witnessed itself already taking place  
In a time marked by assent and by hiatus. (*ST* 70)

<sup>19</sup> Edna Longley, "Inner Émigré or Artful Voyeur?": Seamus Heaney's *North*, p. 57.

The last line of the poem clearly recalls, again, 'Markings' ('marked the spot, marked time and held it open'); the child has apprehended eternity, which, as Huxley writes in *The Doors of Perception*, 'is to discover that we have always been where we ought to be'.<sup>20</sup>

For the adult, this altered perspective on time can involve an act of will. This is demonstrated by the relationship between the sixth and seventh poem of 'Lightenings', where the poet draws upon the biography of Thomas Hardy. In the first of these, the speaker tells a story about Hardy, as a boy, pretending to be dead among a field of a sheep; this is interpreted as a moment when the English poet 'experimented with infinity'

that stir he caused  
In the fleece-hustle was the original  
  
Of a ripple that would travel eighty years  
Outward from there, to be the same ripple  
Inside him at its last circumference. (ST 62)

It is a variation on the Wordsworthian 'spots of time':

There are in our existence spots of time,  
That with distinct pre-eminence retain  
A renovating virtue, whence, depressed  
By false opinion and contentious thought,  
Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight,  
In trivial occupations, and the round  
Of ordinary intercourse, our minds  
Are nourished and invisibly repaired<sup>21</sup>

The seventh poem of 'Lightenings' confirms that he has been preoccupied primarily with evocations of this timeless perception. Written entirely in parenthesis, it begins with an admission that the speaker 'misremembered' the passage to which he alluded; Hardy knelt on all fours, Heaney now clarifies, to stare sheep in the eye in order to feel proleptic sorrow:

And then the flock's dismay went swimming on  
Into the blinks and murmurs and deflections

<sup>20</sup> Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1956), p. 24.

<sup>21</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Imagination and Taste, How and Repaired', p. 326.



He'd know at parties in renowned old age  
When sometimes he imagined himself a ghost  
And circulated with that new perspective. (ST 63)

The conceit of 'keeping' the misremembered version of these events despite its inaccuracy suggests that these two Hardy poems share a common truth. In 1997, Heaney described the imagery of the 'circumference' as the idea that, 'although you can talk about this period of your life and that period of it, your first self and your last self are by no means distinct'.<sup>22</sup> He later refined this concept in 2008, arguing that the ripple is an expression of how a poem can be faithful to 'the original inner lining of your consciousness and, at the same time, register and give credit to all you might have experienced and aspired to and intuited in adult life in the meantime'.<sup>23</sup> While such symbolism of concentric movement will tell us more about Heaney's work after *Seeing Things* than Hardy's experiences, the concomitant essentialism—the idea of a constant self through time—accentuates the experiments with infinity which are evident, in ostensibly different forms, in each of the poems.

In 'Squarings, xlv', he evokes vast three-dimensional space ('Mountain air from the mountain up behind; | Out front, the end-of-summer, stone-walled fields) and a cosmic sense that everything flows ('the slipstream of earth'), but the central feature of enlightened perception here is indicated by a fiddle playing in the distance:

Was music once a proof of God's existence?  
As long as it admits things beyond measure,  
That supposition stands.

So let the ear attend like a farmhouse window  
In placid light, where the extravagant  
Passed once under full sail into the longed-for. (ST 106)

<sup>22</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in Henri Cole, Seamus Heaney: The Art of Poetry, No.75', *Paris Review*, Issue 144, Fall 1997. <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1217/the-art-of-poetry-no-75-seamus-heaney>> [accessed June 2015].

<sup>23</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in George Morgan, 'Interview with Seamus Heaney', *Cynos*, Vo. 15, No.2, *Irlande-Exils* June 2008. Accessed January 2014 <<http://revel.unice.fr/cynos/?id=1594>> [accessed April 2016].

With Larkin already acknowledged as a surprising shadow presence in the book (*ST* 7), this clearly inherits ‘High Windows’ (The sun-comprehending glass, | And beyond it, the deep blue air’), a poem which Heaney admired for its expression of ‘infinitely neutral splendour’ (*GT* 21).<sup>24</sup> But in his own poem Heaney is evoking Pythagoras’ music of the spheres, in which celestial bodies, as they travel through space, make beautiful music; Pythagoras sensed, through discovering a relationship between mathematics and music, an underlying harmony and structure in the universe. We have seen this before in Heaney’s work: in ‘Door into the Dark’, the speaker hears, like Pythagoras, the music of the anvil; in ‘Alphabets’, Heaney reaffirms his attraction to ‘shape-note language’ (*HL* 3) and to Ficino, who also embraced music as a reflection of the Neoplatonic schemata running through the corporeal world. In ‘The Government of the Tongue’, he identifies art as a rehearsal of an ordained heavenly system in earthly terms (*GT* 94). But the new position established in this poem—the recognition of mystery (God) through openness to the wisdom of not knowing (‘things beyond measure’) the speaker stands in stark contrast to thinkers who, after Pythagoras, combine pure mathematics and theology to convey an eternal world revealed to the intellect: Heaney’s knowledge of the timeless moment in which everything exists is embodied and intuitive, not abstract and intellectual; like the light reflected by the farmhouse window, the poet’s outlook is ‘placid’.

### **7.5. Heraclitean Flux**

Heaney reaches back to his childhood locale to access the constituent energies of reality in ‘Wheels within Wheels’. Tripartite in structure, the first section of the poem identifies the experience of turning the wheel of an upside-down bike as the ‘first real grip I ever got on things’, a gnomic statement followed by an evocation of the way the spokes seem to

<sup>24</sup> Philip Larkin, ‘High Windows’, *High Windows* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 165.

disappear and ‘the space between the hub and rim | Hummed with transparency’. With further description of how he threw potatoes into the spinning wheel (‘the hooped air | Spun mush and drizzle back into your face’) and touched it with straw (‘the straw frittered’), the speaker reenters the playful vein which runs through the volume:

Something about the way those pedal treads  
Worked very palpably at first against you  
And then began to sweep your hand ahead  
Into a new momentum—that all entered me  
Like an access of free power, as if belief  
Caught up and spun the objects of belief  
In an orbit coterminous with longing. (ST 46)

In the second section of the poem the speaker depicts his youthful desire to go further still: ‘But enough was not enough. Who ever saw | The limit in the given anyhow?’ (ST 46). The question was originally conceived with ‘the marvellous’ in place of the ‘limit’.<sup>25</sup> As this suggests, there is a case of giddiness when the young man opts to exceed the limits by putting the wheel into a boggy puddle:

The world-refreshing and immersed back wheel  
Spun lace and dirt-suds there before my eyes  
And showered me in my own regenerate clays.  
For weeks I made a nimbus of old glit.  
Then the hub jammed, rims rusted, the chain snapped. (ST 47)

It seems we are witnessing the original experience which Heaney had transformed into the parable of religious erosion in Ireland in ‘The Mud Vision’ in *The Haw Lantern*. But in the third section of the poem he does not, as this might suggest, depict the recovery of Christian belief; rather, he homes in on movement in apparent stillness:

Nothing rose to the occasion after that  
Until, in a circus ring, drumrolled and spotlit,  
Cowgirls wheeled in, each one immaculate  
At the still centre of a lariat.  
*Perpetuum mobile*. Sheer pirouette.  
Tumblers. Jongleurs. Ring-a-rosies. *Stet!* (ST 47)

<sup>25</sup> National Library of Ireland, MS 49,493|86.

For Daniel Tobin, this is Heaney's version of 'Burnt Norton', where Eliot imagines 'the still point of the turning world'.<sup>26</sup> Heaney's 'sacramental vision of the cosmos' in this poem, Tobin argues, 'defines a universe that is inherently liminal, at once in motion and perfectly still':

To be sure, within the *perpetuum mobile* envisioned by the poem, the apparent contradictions of emptiness and fullness, absence and presence, assume the ambiguity of subatomic conditions. To a physicist, the fundamental energy of life may be seen as a particle or a wave. It depends on one's perspective, on how one sees things.<sup>27</sup>

This is insightful, but Tobin does not capture the tone of the poem: Eliot is fixated by the still point; Heaney is celebrating the turning world, more precisely the hidden forces that are moving within things.

A sense of flux is enshrined through contemplation of the afterlife in poem xlv of 'Squarings'. The poem begins with a quotation from Henry Vaughan's bittersweet vision of the afterlife ('*All gone into the world of light?*'), but intimates that such vision is fictional: reading the text, sheer forms appear: 'Otherwise | They do not'. The speaker's flat, almost deadpan denial of Vaughan's version of heaven comes from a sceptical mind which senses 'the nothing there—which was only what had been there'. Heaney is half-sceptical, half-reconceiving nothingness. While this is inherently linked with the emptiness of 'Clearances' and the theological element of the 'no next-time-round' in the opening poem of 'Lightenings', the speaker now employs imagery of fishing to express his feelings:

Although in fact it is more like a caught line snapping,  
That moment of admission of *All gone*,

When the rod butt loses touch and the tip drools

<sup>26</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton', *The Collected Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), pp. 171-176, p. 173.

<sup>27</sup> Daniel Tobin, *Seamus Heaney*, pp. 271-272.

And eddies swirl a dead leaf past in silence  
Swifter (it seems) than the water's passage. (ST 104)

Here, Not only is the dead leaf a classic symbol of the eternal cycle of change, and the eddying flow of the river evokes the Heraclitean dictum of flux.

In 'Settings xxiv', Heraclitean flow manifests in an almost motionless seascape. The speaker sustains uninterrupted description of a deserted harbour in 'stillness' where stones on the sea bed are distinctly visible ('Clarified and dormant under water'). Against this foreground of gentle noise ('very slight | Clucking of the swell against boat boards') and an embodied seascape ('Fullness. Shimmer. Laden high Atlantic | The moorings barely stirred in'), the speaker describes his perception as 'Perfected vision', an ideal which develops into speculation the last stanza:

Air and ocean known as antecedents  
Of each other. In apposition with  
Omnipresence, equilibrium, brim. (ST 80)

Here is what Osip Mandelstam called 'the perception of the world as living equilibrium'.<sup>28</sup> Heaney's abstractions recall those active ones of the timeless moment in 'Markings' ('fleetness, furtherance, untiredness'). The harbour scene recalls the 'Glanmore Sonnets' in *Field Work*, notably the seventh, replete with nautical details ('the lee of Wicklow, | *L'Etoile*, *Le Guillemot*, *La Belle Hélène*'), unites the 'marvellous | And actual' in a vision which does not extend beyond the borders of the BBC shipping forecast map. By contrast, air and ocean in Settings, xxi' form a higher expression of metaphysical unity, a reflection of Yin and Yang momentarily at peace. Supporting this view, Tobin detects in the abstractions in the poem that 'it is the emptiness of all things in particular that restores them to their suchness within

<sup>28</sup> Osip Mandelstam, 'The Morning of Acmeism', *Selected Poems*, trans. Clarence Brown and W.S. Merwin (New York: Atheneum, 1974), p. 146.

the transpersonal field of relation', a 'presiding fundamental "withness" within the inherent diversity of being itself'.<sup>29</sup>

Heaney uses the image of running water to express this timeless constant of fluidity in poem xxxviii of 'Squarings', in which he draws upon a personal memory and the Buddhist symbolism of compassion and flow. In the poem Heaney recalls when he and his wife, on holiday with Bernard and Jane McCabe (the dedicatees of *The Haw Lantern*) to mark the poet's fiftieth birthday, toured the Roman Forum at night; this stirs in Heaney an impulse for 'prophecy':

'Down with form triumphant, long live,' (said I)  
'Form mendicant and convalescent. We attend  
The come-back of pure water and the prayer-wheel.' (ST 98)

The tone of 'said I' confirms this is intended as self-mockery, but however over the top his expression might be, the speaker's rejection of 'stone-cut verses' and assent to flow remains clear. In Tibetan Buddhism, the water prayer wheel is a cyclical device on which there is inscribed the *Om mani padme hum*, the bodhisattva of compassion, with water touched by the wheel becoming known as blessed; A mendicant, in Buddhist tradition, is a religious monk who renounces the world and takes a vow of poverty. Heaney's attraction to this solitary figure is mocked by a voice in the poem which responds to the poet's spontaneous effusion:

'Of course we do.  
But the others are in the Forum Café waiting,  
Wondering where we are. What'll you have?' (ST 98)

This further reflects Heaney's capacity for self-effacement, although that does not necessarily undermine the impulse recorded by the poem. Rather it accords with the generally insouciant tone of the volume, reminding us that the insights of enlightened perception are no basis for superiority. The coffee tastes much the same both for those who perceive its subatomic flux and for those who do not.

<sup>29</sup> Daniel Tobin, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 265.

Heaney's spiritual desire to divine constituent energies—to tap into this flowing current of reality—can be illustrated by 'Settings, xvii', in which he further employs imagery of the waterwheel, this time in unlikely combination combining it with Aristotelian biology, Ovidian metamorphoses and childhood memories of a traditional Ulster cure for wrist sprain practiced in his native south Derry. When the poem begins with a question ('What were the virtues of an eelskin?'), Heaney is thinking about an old school friend, Alfie Kirkwood. In an early draft of 'Station Island', Heaney refers to Kirkwood, 'smelling of eel-oil, | Who wore the eel-skin on his wrist for strength'.<sup>30</sup> Later, in *Human Chain*, this same image will appear as Heaney's 'first encounter with the close up | That had to be put with' (*HC* 29). Using a biblical metaphor to endow the poem with spiritual occasion ('A rib of water drawn | Out of the water'), the speaker elaborates on the schoolboy's experience to go *through* these particulars in order to tap the infinite energy hidden in matter:

When a wrist was bound with eelskin, energy

Redounded in that arm, a waterwheel  
Turned in the shoulder, mill-races poured  
And made your elbow giddy.

Your hand felt unconstrained and spirited  
As heads and tails that wriggled in the mud  
Aristotle supposed all eels were sprung from. (*ST* 73)

Here is Ovidian metamorphoses of the human being infused with the energies of the phenomenal world. Heaney is using a similar homespun mysticism to that of 'Hailstones' in *The Haw Lantern*, where Eddie Diamond's plucking nettles barehanded is a counterpoint for Traherne's vision of eternity. Kirkwood, though he remains anonymous, is seen in the context of Aristotelian biology: the last line of the poem refers to Aristotle's *History of Animals*:

<sup>30</sup> MS 49,493|57.

Eels are derived from the so-called 'earth's guts' that grow spontaneously in mud and in humid ground; in fact, eels have at times been seen to emerge out of such earthworms, and on other occasions have been rendered visible when the earthworms were laid open by either scraping or cutting. Such earthworms are found both in the sea and in rivers, especially where there is decayed matter: in the sea in places where sea-weed abounds, and in rivers and marshes near to the edge; for it is near to the water's edge that sun-heat has its chief power and produces putrefaction.<sup>31</sup>

Aristotle's approach to biology is certainly congenial to Heaney's evocation of metamorphic dynamism. Consider, too, this passage from *Generation of Animals*:

Animals and plants come into being in earth and in liquid because there is water in earth, and air in water, and in all air is vital heat so that in a sense all things are full of soul. Therefore living things form quickly whenever this air and vital heat are enclosed in anything. When they are so enclosed, the corporeal liquids being heated, there arises as it were a frothy bubble. (ibid., 1180)

This is *Seeing Things* cross-pollinated, to employ a biological metaphor, with *Death of a Naturalist*. Given the combination of Aristotle and the waterwheel in this poem, Heaney might be thinking of the question of 'spirit' later set for Yeats: 'Where does spirit live?' (*ST* 78). But he again offers here, through the metamorphosed person of Kirkwood, a picture of the individual human connected with the immaterial energies—the vital principle—of flux.

Perhaps the *locus classicus* of Heaney's Heraclitean aesthetics in *Seeing Things*, comes in the second section of the book's title poem, where he employs the 'dry-eyed Latin word' *claritas* to generate metamorphic perception of the constituent energies of reality. The

<sup>31</sup> *Complete Works of Aristotle, Volume 1: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, (Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 895.



speaker focuses on an image of the Baptism of Christ on the façade of a cathedral, applying *claritas* to the stone sculpture's representation of the 'flowing river'. The textual source for this term might be identified as Joyce's in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, where Stephen searches Thomas Aquinas' *integritas*, *consonantia* and *claritas* for a theory of beauty but ends up finding one for aesthetic perception:

I thought he might mean that *claritas* is the artistic discovery and representation of the divine purpose in anything or a force of generalization which would make the esthetic image a universal one, make it outshine its proper conditions.<sup>32</sup>

Joyce displaces the theological onto the aesthetic, and Heaney does something similar: the religious icon of the Baptism of Christ 'outshines its proper conditions by acting as an emblem not of doctrinal Christianity, but of the way an art—in this case, figures shown in sculptural relief—captures and manifests the otherwise unperceivable'.<sup>33</sup> But all of this only applies to the biblical sculpture, because the poem itself moves back to give a wider picture of the observers:

All afternoon, heat wavered on the steps  
And the air we stood up to our eyes in wavered  
Like the zig-zag hieroglyph of life itself. (*ST* 17)

The heat mirage plays tricks on vision: the ground absorbs sunlight and warms the air above it, creating a mixed current of warm and cold air; looking through this shifting pattern is like peering through an ever-changing lens. This affirmation of the 'invisible' is radically different to 'the invisible, untoppled omphalos' of 'The Toome Road' (*FW* 15): the speaker ends up comparing his vision to the ancient Egyptian hieroglyph of *ankh*, the universalizing symbol of 'life itself'. Heaney again comes full circle here to his earliest aesthetic ideal of

<sup>32</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 1992, 1916), pp. 241-2.

<sup>33</sup> Neil Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 170.

divination, but rather than historical and cultural consciousness of the community, it now recognises flux as the true nature of reality.

A similar recognition of inherent dynamism can be discerned in the quickened scene of poem xlvii, which anticipates the concern with foreknowledge that will become characteristic of the last phase of his work ('Strange how things in the offing, once they're sensed, | Convert to things foreknown'). Heaney offers here one of his most vivid evocations of sudden enlightenment:

At any rate, when light breaks over me  
The way it did on the road beyond Coleraine  
Where wind got saltier, the sky more hurried

And silver lamé shivered on the Bann  
Out in mid-channel between the painted poles,  
That day I'll be in step with what escaped me. (*ST* 108)

Light penetrates three-dimensional space (he takes his eyes off the road as his imagination is stimulated by a vision in mid river), and the constituent state of flux is deftly captured by the hurried sky and glimmering surfaces of water. But the final assertion gestures to the sceptical side of the volume as a whole: it reflects the fact that the poem has not ended with the bliss of enlightenment or penetration of a transcendent realm; the light remains a metaphor for completion that the poet does not attain.

## 8. ‘After Liberation’: Enlightenment in the Late Poems

In an Irish literary context, Louis MacNeice’s summary of Yeats’s change of outlook around the age of fifty provides a striking analogue for the proposed third phase in Heaney’s auto-mythography. Yeats was nearly fifty when he had begun, as MacNeice says, to shake free of ‘the concept of transcendence’; the dream-world of his earlier work gives way to the world in which we live, the latter being ‘governed as for Plato by eternal patterns outside itself’.<sup>1</sup> MacNeice argues that Yeats’s attitude at this juncture and thereafter also increasingly reflected Blake’s idea that ‘Eternity is in love with the productions of time’;<sup>2</sup> Yeats also loved the religious peasant’s quip, recorded in *The Trembling of the Veil*, that ‘God possesses the heavens—but he covets the earth’.<sup>3</sup> For Yeats, MacNeice contends, our earthly dignity has been vindicated; he is ‘no longer ashamed of our world with conflicting people, of oratory and flesh; he is even beginning to be proud of it as something which may be the disguise of the eternal verities but is also their necessary embodiment’.<sup>4</sup> This description invites illuminating parallels to Heaney’s transition into his last phase of work. In his 1989 Ellmann lectures, he began to appreciate how Yeats, after fifty, had introduced a new sceptical understanding of his young questing trust in transcendence and worked the Celtic Twilight themes through a ‘second symbolic distance’ (‘Cornucopia and Empty Shell’; *PW* 68). *Seeing Things* registers that Heaney was ‘nearly fifty’ (‘Fosterling’; *ST* 50) when he had likewise abandoned his own linear quest for transcendence. In the same year, he composed a Blakean vision of eternity in love with the workings of time in ‘The Gravel Walks’ (‘Beautiful in or out of the river, | The kingdom of gravel was inside you too’; *SL* 39), and a year later, in ‘The

<sup>1</sup> Louis MacNeice, ‘Responsibilities’, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (London: Faber and Faber, 1941, 1967), p. 102.

<sup>2</sup> William Blake, ‘The Marriage of Heaven and Hell’, *Poems of William Blake, edited by W.B. Yeats* (London: G Routledge & Sons, 1905), pp. 176-94, p. 180.

<sup>3</sup> W.B. Yeats, ‘Ireland after the Fall of Parnell’, *The Trembling of the Veil* (London: Werner Laurie Ltd, 1922), p. 130.

<sup>4</sup> Louis MacNeice, ‘Responsibilities’, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (London: Faber and Faber, 1941, 1967), p. 102.

Rainstick’, he conveys his freedom from idealistic questing (‘Who cares of all the music that that transpires | Is the fall of grit or dry seeds through a cactus?’) with a further Blakean conviction: ‘You are like a rich man entering heaven | Through the ear drop of a raindrop’ (SL 1). In addition, he had also written around this time the well-known ‘Postscript’, a transcendental vision of western Ireland with Yeatsian undercurrents and an impetus towards non-attachment (SL 70). All three poems are included in *The Spirit Level*, the title of which gives impression that ‘eternal verities’ depend upon the physical world as their ‘necessary embodiment’ just as the bubble cannot be separated from water nor the knot from the tie (SL 54); and the ineluctable reality of things on the ground is perhaps nowhere more evident than in ‘Keeping Going’ (SL 10-12), a humane poem of stoical endurance.

The parallels with Yeats in *The Spirit Level* also extend to the dustjacket of the volume, the illumination from the *Ashmole Bestiary* which depicts three lines of bees entering three domed hives. This image is associated, via the Nobel lecture ‘Crediting Poetry’, with Yeats’s later poem ‘The Stare’s Nest by My Window’ in *The Tower* (1928):

The bees build in the crevices  
Of loosening masonry, and there  
The mother birds bring grubs and flies  
My wall is loosening; honey bees  
Come build in the empty house of the stare.<sup>5</sup>

The bees, like those of the Ashmole illumination, symbolise the idea of order and the poetic soul flying to an Hermetic hive of heaven in association with the art of memory—the practice of material mysticism—which Heaney shared with Yeats.<sup>6</sup> But this also recalls an observation submitted by George William Russell (A.E.) about Yeats’s *A Vision* which might also be applied to Heaney’s bee metaphor and the third cycle as a whole: ‘I feel to follow in the wake of Yeats’s mind’, Russell writes, ‘is to surrender oneself to the idea of Fate and to

<sup>5</sup> W.B. Yeats, ‘The Stare’s Nest by My Window’, *Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1955), pp. 230-1, p. 230.

<sup>6</sup> Rand Brandes, “‘Letter by Strange Letter’: Yeats, Heaney, and the Aura of the Book”, pp. 46-7.

part from the idea of Free Will’.<sup>7</sup> Heaney linked the stereometric instinct of bees with Mandelstam’s depiction of Dante’s *Commedia*: the bees follow an instinctual pattern, as he notes in ‘Envies and Identifications’ and ‘The Government of the Tongue’.<sup>8</sup> Heaney’s bees are a similar metaphor for an ineluctable pattern realised in the narrative work of art, and this presages the way in which, in his final books, the poet will attempt to knit his oeuvre together as an organic whole, concentrating on three features that are associated with enlightened understanding: foreknowledge, non-attachment, and acceptance.

<sup>7</sup> George Russell, ‘Review of *A Vision* (1925)’, *The Irish Statesman*, 13 Feb. 1926, pp. 714-16, p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> Seamus Heaney, ‘Envies and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet’, *Irish University Review*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Spring, 1985), pp. 5-19, pp. 14-16; ‘The Government of the Tongue’, *The Government of the Tongue* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), pp. 91-108, pp. 94-95.

### 8.1. 'All Foreknowledge': Circularity, Foreknowledge, Determinism

The third phase of Heaney's narrative of enlightenment is suffused with motifs of circularity and foreknowledge which endow the poet's oeuvre with late intimations of determinism. At the end of the second part of *Seeing Things*, in 'Squarings, xlviii', the poet set out this theme: 'Strange how things in the offing, once they're sensed, | Convert to things foreknown' (*ST* 108). Around the time that that poem was written, Heaney was making references in prose to the virtue of foreknowledge. In 'Joy or Night', delivered at Oxford in 1990, he argued that the best that literature can do is 'give us an experience that is like foreknowledge of certain things which we already seem to be remembering' (*RP* 159). In a lecture in France in 1992, he similarly argued that 'we move ahead of ourselves in order to arrive at that which was inside us all the time'.<sup>1</sup> In an essay on Friel the following year, he refers approvingly to Jung's 'Prologue' which imagines that people 'are established inalienably in my memories only if their names were entered on the scrolls of my destiny from the beginning, so that encountering them was at the same time a kind of recollection'.<sup>2</sup> Later, in his introduction to *Beowulf*, Heaney wrote of the English language lectures he attended as a student at Queen's University, Belfast: 'I glimpsed an elsewhere of potential which seemed at the same time to be a somewhere being remembered'.<sup>3</sup> The late poems suggests that *Seeing Things* ratified Heaney's intuitive attraction to this arcane idea.

John Wilson Foster has perhaps given the most sustained attention to the theme of foreknowledge in Heaney's work in its spiritual contexts. In 1995, he registered in the poetry 'a quiet sense of destiny'.<sup>4</sup> In 2008, the critic recognised how Heaney's late poetry can 'revise previous versions of the earlier self and inscribe awareness of the later self, such is the

<sup>1</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'The Frontier of Writing', p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'For Liberation: Brian Friel and the Use of Memory', p. 240.

<sup>3</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'Introduction', *Beowulf* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001), pp. xxv.

<sup>4</sup> John Wilson Foster, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 57.

confidence of his persona', sounding a note of caution about 'the risk of self-determination becoming undue self-allusion', making reference to James Stephens's remark that Yeats clanked about in his own rhymes. He concludes that foreknowledge is one of the woven attributes of Heaney's work which has developed into a world that is 'distinctive and "real" enough to tempt him to dwell *on* it, as well as *in* it', but which ultimately brings with it the threat of foreclosure.<sup>5</sup> I have spoken earlier how Foster's remarks about Heaney's sense of life as a 'difficult but motif-ridden script already written'.<sup>6</sup> All of this is relevant to the development of the poet's spirituality. From *The Spirit Level* onwards, he no longer feels compelled to seek the promise land of beatification where 'earthly conflicts between flesh and spirit, beauty, truth, effort and ease, will and temperament, are all elided and assumed into harmony and unity' (AS 16). As a consequence, he seems to allow himself to read his life as a series of inevitable events that he somehow knew were going to happen. In this context, Huxley would argue that 'what is ordinarily called God's foreknowledge is in reality a timeless-now-knowledge, which is compatible with the freedom of the human creature's will in time'.<sup>7</sup> It is difficult to imagine that Heaney would deny free will, given his obsession with liberating oneself from domestic, religious and political attachments. But in *Stepping Stones*, he linked this impulse towards transcendence with the wish for 'a divine corrective to human protestations' (SS 470), a remark that bears connotations of a preordained structure of things. There are legitimate claims, as this chapter demonstrates, that Heaney's imagery of circularity and foreknowledge are the result of the enlightened perception of *Seeing Things* which frees him to work within a deterministic world which Edna Longley called 'closed circuits'.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> John Wilson Foster, 'Crediting Marvels: Heaney After 50', p. 210.

<sup>6</sup> John Wilson Foster, 'Fraught Pleasures: Engaging Seamus Heaney', p. 135.

<sup>7</sup> Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, p. 212.

<sup>8</sup> Edna Longley, 'Pastoral Theologies', *Poetry and Posterity* (Tarsnet: Bloodaxe, 2000), p. 108.

Entering the last stage of his work, Heaney draws an explicit parallel between circle symbolism and the idea of foreknowledge in ‘Poet’s Chair’, a tripartite poem dedicated to Carolyn Mulholland, the Armagh sculptor who produced a bronze artefact in honour of the poet in 1995. The epigraph of the poem is taken from Leonardo’s notebooks, in which he points out that ‘the sun has | never seen a shadow’, with the speaker inviting us to watch the sculptor move: ‘Full circle around her next work, like a lover | In the sphere of shifting angles and fixed love’ (SL 46). This rotational movement and association between love and the sun owes something to Dante who concludes *Paradiso* with an affirmation of the ‘love that moves the sun and other stars’.<sup>9</sup> It embraces the entire poem, and the first section draws directly upon the image:

Angling shadows of itself are what  
Your “Poet’s Chair” stands to and rises out of  
In its sun-stalked inner-city courtyard. (SL 46)

As a poem written in response to a sculpture made in his honour, this introduces a complex and potentially self-regarding reflection on Heaney’s own art: these opening lines offer angling shadows of the poet’s life and work. Furthermore, the historical circumference of the poem encircles an earlier bronze sculpture of Heaney made by Mulholland at the beginning of the poet’s career in the late 1960s. It is a typical case of the poet’s pattern of movement, circling around his work rather than seeking a way beyond current circumstances.

The second section of the poem draws upon Plato’s *Phaedo*. The poet transposes Mulholland’s chair onto the scene of Socrates’ trial where we see him ‘bald as a coot, | Discoursing in bright sunlight with his friends’ (SL 46). By the end of the scene Heaney personifies the leaves on the chair to listen to the silence in the wake of the philosopher’s death (‘The bronze leaves | Cannot believe their ears, it is so silent’), which means they have also heard how Socrates sought to prove in that discourse, as the speaker notes, ‘the soul

<sup>9</sup> Dante, ‘Paradiso XXXIII’, *The Divine Comedy*, p. 499.



immortal' (*SL* 47). Socrates does so by first emphasizing the cyclical nature of life: 'if generation were in a straight line only', he argues, 'and there were no compensation or circle in nature, no turn or return into another, then you know that all things would at last have the same form and pass into the same state'.<sup>10</sup> This leads to his theory of recollection: the idea that knowledge is, like the soul, *a priori*, which he characterises as 'a process of recovering that which has been forgotten through time and inattention' (*ibid*). This Platonic myth may be implicit in the hankering of Oisín Kelly in *Field Work*, where the speaker interprets the sculptor hitting the stone 'as if the grain | Remembered what the mallet tapped to know' (*FW* 34). But now Heaney drops the hermeneutic 'as if' and interjects to comment at the point of Crito closing over Socrates' eyes: 'But for the moment everything's an ache | Deferred, foreknown, imagined and most real' (*SL* 47). Through this mythic method Heaney's earlier Romantic intimations are superseded by philosophical conviction: the ideal of innate knowledge.

The third and final section of the poem secures the connection between circular movement and foreknowledge in the formal structure of Heaney's developing narrative. Circling back to 'Follower' (*DN* 25), the poet conjures a childhood memory of his father ploughing 'one, two, three, four sides' (*SL* 47). The boy Heaney is 'all-seeing | At centre field', his surroundings anticipating the circular movement of the sculptor who moves in the sphere of fixed metaphysical points:

The horses are all hoof  
And burnished flank, I am all foreknowledge.  
Of the poem as a ploughshare that turns time  
Up and over. Of the chair in leaf  
The fairy thorn is entering for the future.  
Of being here for good in every sense. (*SL* 47)

<sup>10</sup> Plato, 'Phaedo', *Dialogues of Plato: containing the Apology of Socrates, Crito, Phaedo, and Protagoras* (New York: Colonial Press, 1899), p. 93.

This scene of harmony marks a development from the Romanticism of the second Glanmore sonnet in *Field Work* which concludes with each ‘verse returning like the plough turned round’ (*FW* 34). The passage circles back, in turning time ‘Up and over’, to the apprehension of the eternal present in ‘Markings’ (‘marked the spot, marked time and held it open’; *ST* 9). It also recovers the magical world-view documented by ‘The Sense of Place’: ‘The single thorn-tree bound us to a notion of the potent world of fairies’, Heaney writes, ‘and when my father cut such a thorn, retribution was seen to follow inexorably when the horse bolted in harness, broke its leg and had to be destroyed’ (*P* 133). In this, the poem also circles back to the third section of ‘Seeing Things’, in which ‘the horse had rusted and reared up and pitched | Cart and sprayer and everything off balance’: the poet’s father appears afterwards, ‘his ghosthood immanent’ (*ST* 18)—an earlier, implicit kernel of the foreknown.

Circularity and foreknowledge are likewise combined by ‘A Brigid’s Girdle’. The conceit of the poem is that Heaney is in Glanmore writing a letter to a friend (‘Last time I wrote I wrote from a rustic table | Under magnolias in South Carolina’), and his addressee is imagined when she ‘faced the music and ache of summer | And earth’s foreknowledge gathered in the earth’. This is linked with circle symbolism when the speaker records that ‘it’s St Brigid’s Day and the first snowdrop | In County Wicklow’ as he plaits

an airy fairy hoop  
(Like one of those old crinolines they’d trindle),  
Twisted straw that’s lifted in a circle. (*SL* 5)

The poet now participates in the St Brigid’s Day scene depicted in ‘Crossings, xxx’, where he remembered how ‘the new life could be entered | By going through her girdle of straw rope’ (*ST* 88). He also circles back to ‘The Sense of Place’, in which the green rushes bind the community to the beneficent spirit of St Brigid; one of his most cherished memories of south Derry, he said, was that of his neighbour Annie Devlin sitting in the middle of a floor strewn with rushes, ‘a kind of local sibyl, plaiting the rushes and plaiting all of us into that ritualized

way of life' (*P* 134). Through his poem, Heaney plaits his reader into this 'rite of spring' which is 'as strange and lightsome and traditional | As the motions you go through going through the thing' (*SL* 5). He is also partly stepping into the shoes of his father who plaited the harvest bow which 'brightens as it tightens twist by twist | Into a knowable corona' ('The Harvest Bow'; *FW* 58). 'The end of art is peace' (*FW* 58) could also be the motto for Heaney's 'airy fairy hoop', but these lightsome and traditional motions have been hard-earned: in *Station Island*, he detached himself from familial and cultural attachment, but after *Seeing Things* he recovers the ritual in a new outlook, beyond unreflective superstition. 'A Brigid's Girdle' is shot through with repetition of words and phrases which intimate that Heaney has moved on from the linear, penetrative dynamic of earlier books, and is circling back to reconceive past experiences.

Intimations of preordained patterns of life are also deeply embedded in 'Mycenae Lookout', a poem about political violence which concludes with a reaffirmation—and visionary integration—of Heraclitean flux. With the speaker having this time circled back through the violence that permeates *North*, the last section of the poem draws on circle and water symbolism which connotes regeneration. The 'treadmill of assault' becomes a 'water wheel':

And then this ladder of our own that ran  
 deep into a well-shaft being sunk  
 in broad daylight, men puddling at the source  
  
 through tawny mud, then coming back up  
 deeper in themselves for having been there  
 like discharged soldiers testing the safe ground,  
  
 finders, keepers, seers of fresh water  
 in the bountiful round mouths of iron pumps  
 and gushing taps. (*SL* 37)

Is the poem describing a new enlightened dynamic or is it merely stuck in the past? John Desmond has engaged with the potential of its ‘grim determinism’.<sup>11</sup> For Desmond, the poem is saved from fatalistic conceptions of cyclic violence by rooting hope as a realistic aim in ordinary communal experience which reflects the possible return to the humane spirit that sustains the best human impulses. The material world of the poem, Desmond contends, points to an ideal metaphysical reality which situates justice within a higher perspective: ‘Nostalgia might then become prophesy, the true past reclaimed for the future’ (ibid., 67). The material world at the conclusion of the poem draws almost verbatim upon Heaney’s own words in ‘Mossbawn’, where he pictures his childhood home during the installation of the famous green pump (the symbol of *omphalos*): ‘men coming to sink the shaft of the pump and digging through that seam of sand down into the bronze riches of the gravel, that soon began to puddle with the spring water’ (P 20). Like the Brigid’s girdle, this fixed point of the *omphalos* has been drawn through the flux of *Seeing Things*: it is now transformed and incorporated into the narrative of enlightenment through the apprehension of constituent energies and circularity in ‘Settings, xvii’ (‘energy | Redounded in that arm, a waterwheel’; ST 73) and ‘Squarings, xxxviii’ (‘We attend | the come-back of pure water and the prayer wheel’; ST 98). Nostalgia indeed becomes not only reclamation but renewal of the past whereby the poet inscribes foreknowledge into the earlier scene. As Elmer Kennedy-Andrews has written, ‘Mycenae Lookout’ derives its power from the poet’s faith in ‘a transcendent, ethical order of being which is anterior to, independent of, our all-too-fallible human models of reality and meaning’, one which is not only available to the ‘special individual’ or ‘unique sensibility’ but to everyone within ‘the democracy of ordinary communal activities and relationships’.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> John Desmond, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 66.

<sup>12</sup> Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, “‘Mycenae Lookout’: Seamus Heaney”, *Irish University Review*, Vol. 39, No. 2, *Poems that Matter 1950-2000* (Autumn | Winter 2009), pp. 358-366, p. 362, p. 363.

‘At Toomebridge’, the opening poem of *Electric Light*, also casts a new, Heraclitean eye over Heaney territory familiar from *Door into the Dark*:

Where the flat water  
Came pouring over the weir out of Lough Neagh  
As if it had reached an edge of the flat earth  
And fallen shining to the continuous  
Present of the Bann.

Where the checkpoint used to be.  
Where the rebel boy was hanged in ’98.  
Where negative ions in the open air  
Are poetry to me. As once before  
The slime and silver of the fattened eel. (*EL* 3)

The spatial dimensions and light of this poem somewhat resemble Hopkins’s ‘God Grandeur’ which opens with similar image: ‘The world is charged with the grandeur of God. | It will flame out like shining from shook foil’. Heaney’s apprehension of the ‘continuous | Present’ mirrors Hopkins’s similar recognition of perennial reality despite human error and toil:

And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.<sup>13</sup>

The spatial edge (‘the brown brink eastward’) also resembles Heaney’s edge of the flat earth’ which draws attention to his transformed awareness of space. Heaney has returned to the landscape and waters of his long poem ‘A Lough Neagh Sequence’, a dark vision of life as eternal repetition of fated lives and deaths symbolised by the cyclical journey of the eel: ‘At Toomebridge where it sluices towards the sea’, the younger Heaney said of the lough, there are ‘gates and tanks against the flow. | From time to time they break the eels’ journey’ (*DD* 38). In that poem, Heaney strikes a melancholic tone, but he also shows his attraction to what he described as the eel being ‘true | to his orbit’: ‘a wisp, a wick that is | its own taper and

<sup>13</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, ‘God’s Grandeur’, *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins* edited by Norman H. MacKenzie, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 139.

light' through 'the weltering darkness' (*DD* 39, 44). Of this earlier image Daniel Tobin has written that it imbibes the idea of necessary victimization—the claim by the lough waters of a human life—embraced by the fishermen whose fatalism suggests a strange wisdom and cognizance of the eels' journey as a manifestation of 'the cyclical character of cosmic time, the "eternal repetition of the fundamental rhythms of the cosmos"'.<sup>14</sup> Heaney now identifies Heraclitean flux in time and responds to 'negative ions', rather than the dark world of eels, which captures the transformation in his reaction to reality; it indicates a new sensitivity to the atmospherics perceived by *Seeing Things*. The structural function of the poem enacts, as Tobin writes, a mirroring of symmetry of the past as well as a forward motion towards the future.<sup>15</sup>

The second poem of *Electric Light*, 'Perch', begs to be read as a companion piece to the first. In Hopkinsian couplets and neologisms ('Perch on their water-perch hung in the clear Bann River | Near the clay bank in alder-dapple and waver'), Heaney claims: 'I saw and I see in the river's glorified body | That is passable through' (*EL* 4). This evokes the title poem of *Seeing Things* where the river is conceived in three-dimensions as 'deep, still, seeable-down-into water' (*ST* 16). In conveying integration with these spatial depths, the specimen perch moves under the river's 'water-roof':

Guzzling the current, against it, all muscle and slur  
In the fenland of perch, the fenland of alder, on air

That is water, on carpets of Bann Stream, on hold  
In the everything flows and steady go of the world. (*EL* 4)

Identifying, and explicitly stating the primacy of, the Heraclitean flow, makes Heaney resemble Hopkins not only formally, but metaphysically: the aesthetic perception of space and time here taps into an animating force of spirituality in the natural world. Like in

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Tobin, *Seamus Heaney*, pp. 56-58.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel Tobin, "'Beyond Maps and Atlases': Transfiguration and Immanence in the Later Poems of Seamus Heaney", pp. 303-304.

‘Epithalamion’, Heaney perceives ‘earthworld, airworld, waterworld thorough hurled, all by | turn and turn about’.<sup>16</sup> For Hopkins, that force emanates from the grandeur of God, but for Heaney the source of divinity is unclear. Not quite caricature, the poem nevertheless exhibits a relaxed contemplation of metaphysics which Hopkins treated more earnestly; the playful approach to mystery that characterised *Seeing Things* is being maintained here.

Having suggested that the new self-referentiality of Heaney’s verse runs the risk of looking self-regarding, his capacity for self-effacement in evoking foreknowledge is also central to an attendant motif of beginningless and endless cosmology in *Electric Light*. ‘The Fragment’ recalls a song which witnesses spiritual light coming from the east (‘Bright guarantee of God, and the waves went quiet. | I could see headlands and buffeted cliffs’) and the theology of fate: ‘Often, for marked courage, fate spares the man | It has not marked already’ (*EL* 57). In the face of ‘objection’ that the speaker has lost his way (‘gone to bits’) and lost track of his narrative (‘his first and last lines | Neither here nor there’), he submits his wry rebuttal:

‘Since when’, he asked,  
‘Are the first line and last line of any poem  
Where the poem begins and ends?’ (*EL* 57)

Heaney casually invokes here, as he does in ‘Wheels within Wheels’, the circularity of Eliot’s ‘East Coker’: ‘In my end is my beginning’.<sup>17</sup> Eliot is full of foreboding, but Heaney is insouciant; his lightened up version of enlightenment is evident in this poem happily assents to the idea of a beginningless and endless sequence evocative of eternity. In ‘The Border Campaign’, Heaney similarly writes of the destruction of the courthouse at Magherafelt: ‘All that was written | And to come I was a part of then’ (*EL* 18). Likewise, intimations of given

<sup>16</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, ‘Epithalamion’, *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins* edited by Norman H. MacKenzie, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 195-197, p. 196.

<sup>17</sup> T.S. Eliot, ‘East Coker’, *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 177.

patterns can also be seen in the timeless spaces of ‘Sonnets from Hellas’. An intersection of chronological time and timelessness is symbolised by ‘a daylight moon’ high above the acropolis, and the movement backwards and forwards on the car journey along the roads of Mount Parnassus is ‘looped like boustrophedon’, a reference to the ancient writing style that alternates direction on successive lines and, as John Wilson Foster has pointed out, comes from the Greek, ‘turning like an ox [bous] while ploughing’.<sup>18</sup> Gesturing back to ‘Glanmore Sonnet II’ (‘Each verse returning like the plough turned round’, *FW* 34), the poem highlights a fundamental difference in the poet’s direction of travel: in that earlier poem, Heaney was seeking a penetrable transcendent dimension through and beyond the landscapes; now he seems content to circle backwards across his oeuvre, assessing and reassessing his life from a decidedly aloof perspective.

Perhaps *Electric Light*’s most evocative imagery of this detached consciousness is inclined to the geometry of the circle comes in ‘Vitruviana’, where Heaney expresses a faith in the five senses which he associated with the dedicatee of the poem, the Irish abstract painter Felim Egan. The first section takes us to the seascape of Portstewart, where the young boy in the ‘deep pool’ is posed like Vitruvian man, ‘both legs wide apart, | Both arms out buoyant to the fingertips’:

My head was light,  
My backbone plumb, my boy-nipples bisected  
And tickled by the steel-zip cold meniscus. (*EL* 53)

Vivid corporeality is shadowed by the physics-speak of the ‘meniscus’, and it is blended with Leonardo’s image which shows the proportional relationships of the human body within a square and a circle, linking the microcosm of man to the macrocosm of the universe. Aesthetic realisation of bodily sensuality and being in space are a result of intense focus on the material world; the metaphysical geometry gestures beyond—but does not exist

<sup>18</sup> John Wilson Foster, ‘Fraught Pleasures: Engaging Seamus Heaney’, p. 118.



independently of—the immediate phenomenological experience of *sensus communis*. The boy’s floating buoyancy is a sharp contrast to the frenzied flight of Sweeney and the Romantic anticipation of the transcendent fishing trip, ‘Somewhere, well out, beyond...’ (FW 24). To borrow Heaney terms on Egan’s abstract art, this opening image stimulates ‘the exquisite ache that the physical world induces’.<sup>19</sup>

The second section of the poem extends the parallel with the geometrical drawing, with the boys at St Columb’s performing star jumps:

We upped and downed and scissored arms and legs  
And spread ourselves on the wind’s cross, felt our palms  
As tautly strung as Francis of Assisi’s  
Giotto’s mural, where angelic neon  
Zaps the ping-palmed saint with stigmata (EL 53).

This deathly and self-denying crucifixion imagery of *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata* is casually transformed into a pleasurable, tactile experience, transforming the spiritual dimension glimpsed in the lines piercing the saint’s palms; in the first section, the Aristotelian world of the deep pool is framed by the Platonic, but now it is penetrated by it. In the first two sections of the poem this sense of place as phenomena within a grid of metaphysical form captures that ache. The immanent world, as Tobin writes, is brought to ‘the brink of transcendent amplitude within and not above the world’.<sup>20</sup> In the third section of the poem, which transports us back to Dublin, Heaney draws upon both T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*:

On Sandymount Strand I can connect  
Some bits and pieces. My seaside whirligig.  
The cardinal points. The grey matter of sand  
And sky. And a light that is down to earth  
Beginning to fan out and open up. (EL 53)

<sup>19</sup> Seamus Heaney, ‘Review of Felim Egan’, Oct. 1992, *Felim Egan* <<http://www.felimegan.ie/heaney.html>> [accessed August 2019].

<sup>20</sup> Daniel Tobin, “‘Beyond Maps and Atlases’: Transfiguration and Immanence in the Later Poems of Seamus Heaney”, p. 319.

The present tense evokes the movement of light bathing Dublin, with a fleeting gesture to the 'Unreal City, | Under the brown fog of a winter dawn' in Eliot's 'The Fire Sermon':

'On Margate Sands.  
I can connect  
nothing with nothing'.<sup>21</sup>

These lines are about Eliot's mental exhaustion in October 1921, and they are also linked with the subsequent references to the Buddhist text from which teaches one to forsake the fleeting pleasures of the physical world.<sup>22</sup> The second major reference in Heaney poem, the Proteus episode of *Ulysses* in which Stephen Dedalus walks on Sandymount Strand, offers the opposite outlook: 'Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes'.<sup>23</sup> As a whole, the poem represents what Heaney said elsewhere of Egan's attraction to where the 'visible and invisible meet', the way in which one part of the artist 'in love with geometry and the symmetrical ideal represented by Leonardo's diagram; but another part is all eyes for what is actually there in front of him'.<sup>24</sup> Like the flesh shadowed by spirit, the poem's anthropocentrism is shadowed by the geometry of the circle with which Heaney associates with circular progression of his life.

*District and Circle* is an intensification of the determinism implicit in Heaney's late outlook, expressing an acquiescence to the perceived concentric laws that govern this poetic life. The opening poem, 'The Turnip-Snedder', concentrates upon the physical realities of the eponymous medieval tool and its output: 'it dropped its raw sliced mess, | bucketful by glistening bucketful' (DC 4). The poem suggests, as Rand Brandes has written, that 'we live in a heartless and mechanical world and universe devoid of meaning, mercy and hope', that

<sup>21</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'The Fire Sermon', *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), pp. 67-70, p. 70.

<sup>22</sup> Henry Clarke Warren, *Translations in Buddhism* (Harvard University Press, 1896), pp. 351-353, pp. 352-353.

<sup>23</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: Penguin, 1922), p. 31.

<sup>24</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'On Felim Egan: a short note by Seamus Heaney', *Stedelijk Museum Catalogue*, 1999, *Felim Egan* <<http://www.felimegan.ie/c.html>> [accessed August 2019].

there is ‘no end in sight, no revelation, no resurrection or rebirth, just meaningless filling the vacuum of space’.<sup>25</sup> A similar feeling haunts ‘Rilke: *The Apple Orchard*’, a poem which constitutes a symbolism of predestined patterns. Looking to an ominous sunset scene (‘Come just after the sun has gone down, watch | This deepening of green in the evening sward’), there are disheartening hints of ideal which encourage one to forget about free will:

Is it not as if we’d long since garnered  
And stored within ourselves a something which

From feeling and from feeling recollected,  
From new hope and half-forgotten joys  
And from an inner dark infused with these,  
Issues in thoughts as ripe as windfalls scattered

Here under trees (*DC* 68).

Here Heaney remains faithful to Rilke’s poem, but the closing lines make a subtle change:

Ready to serve, replete with patience, rooted

In the knowledge that no matter how above  
Measure or expectation, all must be  
Harvested and yielded, when a long life willingly  
Cleaves to what’s willed and grows in mute resolve. (*DC* 68)

For Rilke, this readiness to serve is a commitment to ‘one goal: to give yourself! | And silently to grow and to bear fruit’.<sup>26</sup> Of this idea he has elsewhere commented, in a letter to Witold von Hulewicz on the *Duino Elegies*, that it is ‘we who can multiply our possessions of the Invisible during our earthly existence, in us *alone* can there be accomplished this intimate and continual transmutation of the Visible into the Invisible’, just as our own destiny ‘becomes increasingly more present, and at the same time invisible, in us’. Rilke claims that the *Elegies* affirm and glorify consciousness of this ‘norm of existence’ and evoke

<sup>25</sup> Rand Brandes, ‘The Poetics of Reverie and Revelation in the Last Poems’, p. 337.

<sup>26</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, ‘The Apple Orchard’, *Selected Poems of Rainer Rilke*, trans. Albert Ernest Flemming (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 96.

‘foreknowledge of such affinities’.<sup>27</sup> For Heaney, the pattern of reality is presented in a more somber way: assent to ‘what’s willed’ and ‘mute resolve’ seems less like bearing fruit than simply *bearing*, an acceptance of what Desmond elsewhere described as ‘grim determinism’.<sup>28</sup> The last poem of *District and Circle*, ‘The Blackbird of Glanmore’, sustains this cyclical structure of the oeuvre as it moves towards its conclusion. The poem is laced with Heaney’s artistic history: the blackbird at Glendalough near Glanmore (‘St Kevin and the Blackbird’), the poet’s cottage at Glanmore, *The Cure at Troy* (‘I want away to the house of death, to my father’), and ‘Mid-Term Break’ in *Death of a Naturalist*. The primary themes of the poem, as I will later discuss, are non-attachment and acceptance of death, but its symbolic images of raked gravel and the blackbird function in part as another expression of Heaney’s detached passiveness.

A pattern of eternal return in *Human Chain* is underpinned by loose mythic parallels with Book VI of *Aeneid*.<sup>29</sup> In ‘Route 110’, Heaney begins with his experience as a student in Belfast where we are invited to take on his view of haphazard shopkeeper ponder ‘what to charge | For a used copy of *Aeneid* VI’. The literal direction of travel is north: from Belfast to Bellaghy (‘Route 110, Cookstown via Toome and Magherafelt’). But the metaphorical travel moves towards the completion of a life cycle: circling back through images of the past, the poet moves towards the Virgilian riverbank (‘as if we commingled | Among shades and shadows stirring on the brink) and becomes ‘ever needier for translation’ (*HC* 37). This coincides with ‘the age of births’ in the last section of the poem where we see the poet recall the morning after the birth of his granddaughter, Anna Rose, and later when the family will

<sup>27</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, ‘Letter to Witold von Hulewicz, 13 November 1925’, *Selected Letters of Rainer Rilke*, trans. R.F.C Hull (London: Macmillan & Co, 1946), pp. 393-5.

<sup>28</sup> John Desmond, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 66.

<sup>29</sup> See Michael R. Molino, “‘The Freed Speech of “Equivocal Words”’: Seamus Heaney’s Door into the Light’, *‘The Soul Exceeds Its Circumstances’*: *The Later Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, edited by E. O’Brien (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2016), pp. 89-106.

gather round speaking in ‘baby talk’: as her ‘earthlight breaks’ the poet arrives, with his ‘bunch of stalks and silvered heads’, as one whose ‘long wait on the shaded bank has ended’ (HC 57). The poem exemplifies, as Michael Parker has said, how intimations of foreknowledge are integral to Heaney’s late work.<sup>30</sup> The older poet we see in ‘Route 110’ is also the translator of *Aeneid* in ‘The Riverbank Field’ in which the Lethe is confounded with Moyola: the souls on the riverbank, Heaney writes, once ‘they have rolled time’s wheel a thousand years | Are summoned here to drink the river water’ (HC 48). The mythical pattern is circular, with time presented as concentric movement: these poems parallel the structure of the oeuvre which they help complete.

This deterministic conception of circularity and foreknowledge can be further illustrated by ‘Wraiths’, a poem which provides the background for a meditation on this arcane theme which so preoccupied the poet after *Seeing Things*. In drawing upon Irish mythology and the doctrine of reincarnation, the second section of the poem opens out to exposed heights: ‘Above the town, open as a hillfort, | A panned sky and a light wind blowing’ (HC 64). Gaeltacht-bound youngsters getting off the bus are transmogrified into ghosts: ‘We were wraiths in the afternoon’ (HC 63). A frisson of cultural and adolescent sexual unease (‘Between languages, half in thrall to desire, | Half shy of it’) gives way to the strange moment of cyclical rebirth:

when a flit of the foreknown  
Blinked off a sunlit lake near the horizon

And passed into us, climbing and clunking up  
Those fretted metal steps, as we reboarded  
And were reincarnated seat by seat. (HC 64).

<sup>30</sup> Michael Parker, ““Renewed, Transfigured, in Another Pater”: Metaphor and Displacement in Seamus Heaney’s *Human Chain*”, *The Soul Exceeds Its Circumstances’: The Later Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, edited by E. O’Brien (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2016), p. 163.

The odd phrase ‘flit of the foreknown’ is deeply suggestive: ghosts flit, which is to move somewhere quickly and lightly, to appear suddenly or temporarily, or to move secretly, all of which befits the metaphor of the *anima mundi* moving off the lake and into the bodies reincarnated on the bus. In its spatial origin here (‘a sunlit lake near the horizon’), the ‘foreknown’ appears in an identical way to ‘Squarings, xlviii’, where the idea of foreknowledge was first introduced into Heaney’s poetry (*ST* 108). In this light, ‘The Conway Stewart’, in which Heaney recalls receiving a pen as a parting from his parents as they dropped him off at boarding school, could also be seen as a significant moment of a destiny being fulfilled (*HC* 9): it bears tentative hints that, for all his emphasis on artistic freedom and academic achievement, Heaney had as little say in the trajectory of his life as he had in being sent to St Columb’s College. Indeed, although we are encouraged to think of ourselves as free to choose our own path (like Heaney choosing the pen over the spade in *Death of a Naturalist*), the poet’s late thought increasingly seems to accord with Foster’s characterisation of him as a thinker who considered life ‘a difficult but motif-ridden script already written’. In the next chapter, I will raise the question as to whether this development may be reconsidered in parallel with Heaney’s late emphasis on the spirituality of non-attachment.

## 8.2. Non-Attachment

Heaney's later poetry repeatedly adumbrates by implication the state of non-attachment—emancipation from ego-centric ideas of possession—which reflects his acceptance that the deliberate quest for a permanent state of transcendence or control is a hindrance to what he will increasingly evoke as the fleeting condition of enlightenment. In his letter to Marie in *Sources*, he recognised that 'it can sometimes seem that your sustenance ends up choosing you rather than the other way around'.<sup>1</sup> In 'Album', he similarly gestures to this notion of grace: 'great proofs often come | Of a sudden, one-off', followed by 'the steady dawning || Of whatever *erat demonstrandum*' (*HC* 7). The proofs of the Divine, as St John of the Cross said, can only be contained and known in an empty and solitary heart.<sup>2</sup> Heaney signalled that he was willing to make this change of heart in 'Fosterling': 'Time to be dazzled and the heart to lighten' (*ST* 50). His reward was aesthetic perception of three-dimensional space, the eternal Now and Heraclitean flux; his lesson was that enlightened perception is transient. This chapter will examine Heaney's key poems of non-attachment which demonstrate this understanding of the nature of enlightenment as a momentary rather than a fixed state, drawing attention to the beginning of a new depth of compassion. 'At Banagher' synthesizes Buddhism with the work of a local tradesman to demonstrate the qualities of restraint and the value in the momentary loss of self. 'St Kevin and the Blackbird' draws upon Irish Catholic hagiography to illustrate the incentive behind the loss of selfhood: union with the divine Ground. 'Postscript' celebrates the transience of the revelatory moment which eludes grasping, and locates spiritual knowledge in the human heart. 'The Blackbird of Glanmore' conveys the transformative vision of reality which follows liberation from the self. 'Hermit

<sup>1</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in Marie Heaney, *Sources: Letters from Irish People on Sustenance for the Soul* (Dublin: Town and Country House, 1999), p. 160.

<sup>2</sup> St John of the Cross, quoted in Aldous Huxley, 'Mortification, Non-Attachment, Right Livelihood', *The Perennial Philosophy*, p. 134.

Songs' traces the ideal to Irish Christian texts to warn against excessive emotions which cloud the apprehension of reality, as well as the necessity of learning from others and maintaining an open mind about the spiritual dimension. 'A Kite for Aibhín' closes Heaney's overarching narrative with intimations of artistic completion infused with the intensification of self-transcendence through a willingness to let go of feelings of ownership. Across each of these poems liberation is consistently presented as an ephemeral moment of self-forgetfulness.

Heaney illustrates non-attachment within the philosophical context of Buddhism in 'At Banagher', synthesizing in his vision the tenets of self-transcendence and the mendicant state of mind. Divided into two sections, the first part of the poem is presented as an unexpected flash of insight to be decoded: 'Then all of a sudden there appears to me | The journeyman tailor who was my antecedent' (*SL* 67). A journeyman is a skilled worker employed by another, which suggests that Heaney—given his self-identification at the outset—considers himself as working for an authority beyond himself. The tailor's 'eyelids steady as a wrinkled horn or iron' are resonant of Yeats's Chinamen who symbolise the joyful state of the artist in 'Lapis Lazuli': 'Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes, | Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay'.<sup>3</sup> The product of the work ('clothes | His touch has the power to turn to cloth') is mundane in contrast to 'Thatcher', where the product is magical ('left them gaping at his Midas touch'; *DD* 20); enlightenment is no longer a flashy conjuring trick but a transformation of materials effected by self-forgetful labour. Non-attachment becomes symbolised by restraint: 'Keeping his counsel always, giving none'. The self is forgotten when one becomes absorbed in the process of work: the tailor is 'Self-absenting, both migrant and ensconced', a transient insight reaffirmed by the closing stanza: 'All of a sudden

<sup>3</sup> W.B. Yeats, 'Lapis Lazuli', *Collected Poems*, pp. 338-339, p. 339.



he appears to me, | Unopen, unmendacious, unilluminated' (SL 67). A Buddhist framework acts as a mode of interpreting this memory:

Does he ever question what it all amounts to?

Or ever will? Or care where he lays his head?  
My Lord Buddha of Banagher, the way  
Is opener for your being in it. (SL 67-68).

Those rhetorical questions intimate enlightened recognition that we are only passing through this world and own nothing of it. This non-attachment to the world is also a contrast to the superstition associated with the Heaney name as recorded in 'Mossbawn' in 1978: 'There is a St Muredach O'Heney associated with the old church at Banagher; and there is also a belief that sand lifted from the ground at Banagher has beneficent, even magical properties, if it is lifted from the site by one of the Heaney family name' (P 21). A 'superstitious hankering', this recollection aided a more serious conviction in the '*omphalos*' (P 20) which would find expression in 'The Toome Road'; Heaney's symbolism of the Buddha contrasts, by definition, any such essentialist attachment. His momentary vision of the mendicant journeyman provides an altered perspective which infuses the speaker with enthusiasm and direction, with the reference to 'the way' a conscious nod to Taoism, indicating both the right way to live and the way the world works, and the word 'opener' generating a feeling of still dilation not unlike 'Hailstones'.

Non-attachment is also the central principle depicted by 'St Kevin and the Blackbird', a parable poem which draws upon Irish Catholic hagiography. Heaney recalls the legend that Kevin experienced spiritual transformation when, as he prays with arm stretched out of his narrow cell window, he allows a blackbird to nest on his hand:

Kevin feels the warm eggs, the small breast, the tucked  
Neat head and claws, and, finding himself linked  
Into the network of eternal life

Is moved to pity: now he must hold his arm  
Like a branch out in the sun and rain for weeks

Until the young are hatched and fledged and flown. (SL 20)

Thanks to the bird, Kevin finds ‘himself linked into the network of eternal life’, although this should be seen as less a case of achieving a new connection as of recognizing an old one—the self has always been indivisible from the whole. It is interesting that the dominant emotion of this scene is not one of excited spiritual anticipation and revelation—which was characteristic of earlier volumes—but rather pity: the compassionate heart, in *imitatio Christi*, eradicates the ego. But Heaney recovers this spiritual value of non-attachment by avoiding Catholic hagiography, with the second part of the poem adopting a format of sceptical questions based on the acknowledgement that it the story is purely fiction (‘the whole thing’s imagined’). Inviting the reader to ‘imagine being Kevin’, he asks:

Which is he?  
Self-forgetful or in agony all the time

From the neck on out down through his hurting forearms?  
Are his fingers sleeping? Does he still feel his knees?  
Or has the shut eyed blank of underearth

Crept up through him? Is there distance in his head? (SL 20)

By posing these questions about Kevin’s inner state, as John Desmond has said, Heaney ‘undercuts the simple hagiographic legend’.<sup>4</sup> In *Lives of the Irish Saints*, Kevin is celebrated as a moral and edifying example whose ‘love of holiness’, ‘greatness of soul’ and ‘force of character’ were rooted in ‘entire self-devotedness [...] to sanctify themselves and to promote the Christian welfare of others’.<sup>5</sup> The poem does not celebrate this reputed proselytizing; it is focused on his human impulse towards union with the network of eternal life, a union he does not want to lose sight of:

Alone and mirrored clear in love’s deep river,  
“To labour and not to seek reward”, he prays,

<sup>4</sup> John Desmond, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 70.

<sup>5</sup> Rev. John O’Hanlon, ‘St Coegmin or Kevin, Abbot of Glendalough, County Wicklow’, *Lives of the Irish Saints* (New York: The Catholic Publishing Society, 1873), pp. 28-67, p. 28.

A prayer his body makes entirely  
For he has forgotten self, forgotten bird  
And on the riverbank forgotten the river's name. (SL 20-21)

Focus remains on union with the divine Ground which dissolves the artificial selfhood that has been generated by ego, that part of us which 'seeks reward'. For Helen Vendler, the close of the poem depicts a stoicism that 'turns into something undistinguishable from lyric death': 'Heaney's persuasive powers are such that the reader, having been conducted phase by phase through the stages of Kevin's suffering and self-forgetfulness, ends by admiring the saint's devotion'.<sup>6</sup> Implicit in Vendler's judgement is the sense that the story alone—without the sceptical question—would be ineffective; the reader, in Vendler's view, needs to be persuaded by the questions rather than the oneness with reality. For Tobin, the idea of 'lyric death' is problematic. Tobin is more sensitive to the spiritual import of the poem: he identifies it as a *via negativa* which arrives at a 'self-transcending outcome, an encounter with superabundant being'. The level of consciousness may look like lyric death but 'its more salient countermeasure is the fulfilment of lyric life—the fulfilment of self in superabundance'.<sup>7</sup> This interpretation may be supported by the manuscripts of Heaney's poem which reveal that he associated Kevin's moral example with this lyric amplitude:

Compared with Atlas posted faithfully  
At the world's end, or that bishop with his hand  
Held steady on the coals for Protestantism,

Kevin's playing games. He stands for lyric  
Intervention in the scheme of things [...].<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 164.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Tobin, "'Beyond Maps and Atlases': Transfiguration and Immanence in the Later Poems of Seamus Heaney", p. 321.

<sup>8</sup> National Library of Ireland: Manuscript and typescript drafts of poems collected in *The Spirit Level*. MS 49, 493/106.

Yet Heaney evidently dropped these lines for a reason; they do not convey the true incentive of Kevin's action: the spiritual union within the network of eternal life makes suffering in *any* form worthwhile.

Kevin's attachment to the goals and rewards coveted by the egotistical self has been loosened, and a similar non-attachment is central to the last poem of *The Spirit Level*, 'Postscript'. The poem originally appeared in *The Irish Times* on 10 October 1992, with the opening line: 'Some time make the time to drive out west'.<sup>9</sup> Subsequently, Heaney altered this first line to begin the poem *in media res* ('And some time, make the time') which, in better giving the impression of scribbling down a postscript mid-thought, catches the spirit of improvisation as the reader is invited to drive 'along the Flaggy Shore, | In September or October':

when the wind  
And the light are working off each other  
So that the ocean on one side is wild  
With foam and glitter, and inland among stones  
The surface of a slate-grey lake is lit  
By the earthed lightning of a flock of swans,  
Their feathers roughed and ruffling, white on white,  
Their fully-grown headstrong-looking heads  
Tucked or cresting or busy underwater. (SL 70)

In this visionary moment, the poet apprehends the transcendental ('earthed lightning of a flock of swans') and the flux of elements which, to use Donne's verb, interinanimate each other. In the context of Heaney's oeuvre, it can be contrasted to 'The Peninsula' (DD 21). Similarly, the earlier poem invites the reader to drive along the coast, and it also evokes three-dimensional space ('The sky is tall as over a runway, | The land without marks'). The speaker apprehends enclosed images of 'leggy birds stilted on their own legs, | Islands riding

<sup>9</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'Postscript', *The Irish Times* (1921-Current File), Dublin, Ireland: 10 October 1992 <<https://search.proquest.com/docview/524628856?accountid=14775>> [accessed July 2018].

themselves out into the fog'. From this observation of allegedly distinct bodies the reader is encouraged to derive a system of thought which can 'uncode all landscapes' by 'things founded clean on their own shapes, | Water and ground in their extremity' (*DD* 21). On the Flaggy Shore, things are not founded clean on their own shapes because they form part of a greater whole in which everything is flowing and 'working off each other'. It is as though the earlier poem has been reprocessed, its author having subsequently gone through the doors of perception opened by *Seeing Things*: the narrow, self-enclosed vision of fragmentation has been transformed into an embodied world of flux.

Beyond Heaney's oeuvre, the transcendental symbolism of swans can of course be found in Yeats's 'The Wild Swans at Coole', a poem set in Lady Gregory's permanent residence approximately twenty-five kilometres away from Heaney's Flaggy Shore. Yeats also remembers western Ireland in autumn ('Under October twilight the water | Mirrors a still sky'), where on the 'brimming water among the stones | Are nine-and-fifty swans':

But now they drift on the still water,  
Mysterious, beautiful;  
Among what rushes will they build,  
By what lake's edge or pool  
Delight men's eyes when I awake some day  
To find they have flown away?<sup>10</sup>

While looking back at the past, and ahead to an uncertain future, Yeats laments his inability to eternalize the present. By contrast, the peroration of Heaney's poem consciously recognises and celebrates such fleeting sensation:

Useless to think you'll park and capture it more thoroughly.  
You are neither here nor there,  
A hurry through which known and strange things pass  
As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways  
And catch the heart off guard and blow it open. (*SL* 70)

<sup>10</sup> W.B. Yeats, 'The Wild Swans at Coole', *Collected Poems*, pp. 147-148, p. 148.

The numinous wind commands Heaney's acceptance and stimulates an open-ended sense of enlightenment as inherently ephemeral. As Daniel Tobin writes, the poet arrives at an ecstatic vision of the heart opening in 'a moment of grace, triggering *kenosis*—its self-emptying into immensity, the transcendent having been made immanent in a tantalizing, momentary awareness of self-completion'.<sup>11</sup> There is a certain truth to Heaney's joke that the poem could have had a Wordsworthian title of 'A Memorial of a Tour by Motorcar with Friends in the West of Ireland' (SS 366), as it invites comparison with a well-known poem: 'My heart leaps when I behold | A rainbow in the sky'. Wordsworth wishes his days 'to be | Bound each to each by natural piety';<sup>12</sup> Heaney's poem *is* bound by natural piety; he intimates that the apprehension of oneness can only be fleeting, not a systematic method by which to uncode phenomena or impose artificial distinctions. The ego-centric drive for comprehensive representation of the transcendent is replaced by the open heart: the poet experiences not only intellectual ('Useless to *think* you'll park and capture it more thoroughly') but compassionate and spiritual transformation. In *Stepping Stones*, he described it as a ratification of his work (SS 366); it is also a new sympathetic openness to experience and self-compassion. Compare his concluding image of the heart to that of another exemplary predecessor, Hopkins:

My own heart let me more have pity on; let  
 Me live to my sad self hereafter kind,  
 Charitable; not live this tormented mind  
 With this tormented mind tormenting yet.  
 I cast for comfort I can no more get  
 By groping round my comfortless, than blind  
 Eyes in their dark can day or thirst can find  
 Thirst's all-in-all in all a world of wet.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Tobin, "'Beyond Maps and Atlases': Transfiguration and Immanence in the Later Poems of Seamus Heaney", p. 313.

<sup>12</sup> William Wordsworth, 'My heart leaps up when I behold', *The Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth* (Boston; New York; Chicago; San Francisco: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1904), p. 277.

Hopkins aspires to ‘unforeseen times’ of joy.<sup>13</sup> Momentary non-attachment to ideas of control and ownership, in Heaney’s poem, help him to realize such a moment of grace, altering his earlier conceptions of a penetrable dimension of transcendence.

A similar moment of grace is recorded by another driving poem, ‘Nonce Words’. Written in sparse six-lined stanza, the poem takes place in Fermanagh; the speaker, heading south, has taken a wrong turn thanks to ‘a sign mistaken’: the road taken to bypass Cavan has taken him west, so we follow him out of Derrylin where he crosses a bridge into unexpected beauty:

Sun on ice,  
white floss  
on reed and bush,  
the bridge cast  
in an advent silence  
I drove across,

then pulled in,  
parked and sat  
breathing mist  
on the windscreen.  
*Requiescat . . .*  
I got out

well happed up,  
stood at the frozen  
shore gazing  
at rimed horizon,  
my first stop  
like this in years. (DC 44)

Derailed from his intended path, the poet is stunned by this hidden paradise, edging towards the windscreen until, with whispers of mortality (*‘Requiescat’*) that also sound throughout this volume, he follows his instinct further to experience things from outside the car; but he is also content to gaze at the offing, invoking both ‘Casualty’, where the horizon is the ‘proper

<sup>13</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, ‘Poem 163’, *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins* edited by Norman H. MacKenzie, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 186.

haunt' (*FW* 24), and 'Squarings, xlviii', where he promises—tongue in cheek—to inhabit that realm (*ST* 108). It has been, like 'Postscript', a moment of benediction, the liberating unguardedness of non-attachment still invigorating the speaker when he

blessed myself  
in the name of the nonce  
and happenstance,  
the *Who knows*  
and *What nexts*  
and *So be its*. (*DC* 44)

The poem has, literally and metaphorically, taken a turn: the speaker who set out on the car journey is apparently a very different one to the one we see here; he has given unconditional assent to caprice, throwing away his sense of control and making a promise to himself to be newly open to experience. The enlightenment is transitory, since such focused experiences, as the poem itself recognises, are rare: the nonce words are for these unique incidents which, without our direction, disrupt our plans or habitual rhythms. Though, in Heaney's case, as a writer, letting go like this might be a readjustment to circular rhythms and 'earth's foreknowledge' (*SL* 5).

Another moment of this transformative awareness is the subject of 'The Blackbird of Glanmore', the closing poem of *District and Circle*. In evoking the blackbird, the poem to emulates the clarity and exquisite plainness of diction of early Irish nature poetry: 'On the grass when I arrive, | Filling the stillness with life'. At the outset, arrival is counterbalanced by departure ('In the ivy when I leave') whereby the continuous present of nature symbolised by the blackbird—in contrast to the transient flux of daily comings and goings, like the commute to work behind this poem—is embraced by the poet: 'It's you blackbird, I love' (*DC* 75). There is a distinctively meditative moment in the poem where the speaker focuses on breathing:

I park, pause, take heed.  
Breathe. Just breathe and sit  
And lines I once translated



Come back: 'I want away  
To the house of death, to my father

Under the low clay roof'. (DC 75)

The breathing exercises conjures lines from his translation of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, and they are followed by thoughts of Christopher ('little stillness dancer') whose death and funeral was recorded in 'Mid-Term Break'. Not recorded in the earlier poem are the superstitions of a neighbour who claimed to have witnessed a bird on the roof for weeks before the accident: "I said nothing at the time || But I never liked yon bird' (DC 75-76).

The last two units of the poem convey a transformative out-of-body experience whereby the poet attains momentary non-attachment to the self:

The automatic lock  
Clunks shut, the blackbird's panic  
Is shortlived, for a second  
I've a bird's eye view of myself  
A shadow on raked gravel

In front of my house of life.

Hedge-hop, I am absolute  
For you, your ready talkback,  
Your picky, nervy gold-beak—  
On the grass when I arrive,

In the ivy when I leave. (DC 76)

In the raked gravel there are intimations of Japanese rock gardens associated with Zen Buddhism and the tenet of non-attachment: the gravel is a representation of the universe in its inherent constituents of flux. Given the 'bird's eye view', it might be tempting to see this as another defamiliarized, aerial view like Sweeney's, but it is perhaps better to see it as a more direct, piercing apprehension of the *haecceitas* and three-dimensional spaces of nature like in 'Seeing Things'. For Rand Brandes, the blackbird becomes a cosmic symbol of rebirth. The poet is breaking away, Brandes argues, 'from the gravitational pull of the autobiographical world of "automatic locks", those socially constructed barriers to illumination, revelation,

transformation'.<sup>14</sup> In a momentary out-of-body experience, the poet is looking down and back in time to a moment of harmony in which the world is becoming conscious of itself, of reuniting the world and self in a moment of wonder. In terms of non-attachment, there is much to commend in his reading of this self-transcendence: the poet does indeed step out of time through the moment of transcendent experience, though the terminology of neuroscience can also be helpful in better clarifying these last two units of the poem.

There is also a contrast between the perception of the human being and the animal in the last scenes of the poem which corresponds to neuroscientific readings of the brain as divided between the left and right hemispheres and regulated by the frontal lobe. The bird exercises two modes of vigilance: its narrow, focused attention which Heaney vicariously explores is what makes the shadow seem like the only perceptible aspect of the man below; it also exercises broad vigilance which alerted it to the presence of the human poet as a potential predator ('ready to scare off | At the very first wrong move'; *DC* 75). The human being functions in much the same way, except we have the frontal lobe which allows us to stand back from the immediacy of such experiences. It creates a distance from the world which engenders control and manipulation but also the possibility compassion and creativity. As Iain McGilchrist writes: 'To live headlong, at ground level, without being able to pause (stand outside the immediate push of time) and rise (in space) is to be like an animal; yet to float off into the air is not to live at all—just to be a detached observing eye'.<sup>15</sup> One needs to bring back 'what one has learned from one's ascent', as McGilchrist has said, 'back into the world where life is going on, and incorporate it in such a way that it enriches experience' (*ibid*). Within this scientific frame of reference, the last two units of the poem can be read as symbols of the left and right hemisphere: the narrowed attention which provides a

<sup>14</sup> Rand Brandes, 'The Poetics of Reverie and Revelation in the Last Poems', p. 341.

<sup>15</sup> Iain McGilchrist, 'Asymmetry and the Brain', *The Master and his Emissary* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 22.

representation of the world as raked gravel and shadows, and the embodied perception of the bird's unique qualities which conjures the contexts, connections and memories of familial relationships and profound grief. In this poem it is not so much the child archetype which is the causal root of non-attachment as the necessary distance inspired by the bird via the workings of the frontal lobe. Perhaps it *is* therefore right, to answer Kay's question, 'to be in love with a spectre that summons the memory of dead relatives': like 'St Kevin of the Blackbird', the bird is the integral part of the realisation of self-forgetfulness which enriches the experience of the poet who, returning the world of the everyday, reconceptualises reality as a spiritual cornucopia made possible by non-attachment to life given that there is not much point in trying to cling to something over which we have no control.

A shedding of ambition is enacted by 'Hermit Songs', in which Heaney draws upon the Christian teachings articulated by Irish saint Macóige of Lismore. Divided into ten sections, the first is a tactile representation of covering a new school textbook ('Its brede of bosomed roses pressed | And flattened under smoothing irons') to maintain its 'newness', with the last phrase of the poem only partly an instruction from the schoolteacher: 'Learn you were a keeper only' (*HC* 71). This basic school rule is also an articulation of conscious non-attachment: it connotes the commonplace fact that the books must be used after you have used them, but it also describes the human condition as a fleeting inheritance of knowledge and, on a more fundamental level, the human body as a temporary conduit of permanent truths. In apprehending this lesson one makes space for non-attachment to ideas of originality and separation. The 'divine eternal fullness of life', as Huxley writes, 'can be gained only by those who have deliberately lost the partial, separative life of craving and self-interest, of ego-centric thinking, feeling, wishing and acting'.<sup>16</sup> Heaney synthesizes this ideal with one of

<sup>16</sup> Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, p. 113.

the ‘riddle-solving anchorites’ St Macóige of Lismore who, as he notes, clarified ‘which attribute | Of character was best’:

‘Steadiness, for it is best

When a man has set his hands to tasks  
To persevere. I have never heard  
Fault found with that.’ (HC 72)

Here Heaney is quoting from the recorded conversation of Macóige which has a rich context of spiritual instruction when laid out in its extended commentary:

This is what Mac Oige of Lismore said in reply to a certain man who inquired of him which attribute of the clerical character is best for him to acquire. He replied: ‘That attribute with which he has never yet heard fault found. If a man be distinguished [for charity]’, said he, ‘it is said that his charity is too great; if humble, it is said again that that man is too humble; if ascetic, that his abstinence is excessive, and so with the rest. I have never heard, however,’ said he, ‘of anyone of whom it was said “that this man is too steady.” Whatever task a man has set his hand to, it is best for him to persevere in it’, etc.<sup>17</sup>

In this account, steadiness is contextualised within the terms of non-attachment to ego-centric excess. Like ‘St Kevin and the Blackbird’, Heaney’s poem deftly avoids Catholic hagiography by omitting the fact this is being described as an attribute of ‘clerical character’, as his own primary message is essentially secular and universal: learn that truths do not belong to oneself alone; just as the sense of enlightenment is transient, so are we, persevering before disappearing. In the final section of the poem, he extends this thematic link with Macóige by defining himself against the philosophical terms of Milosz’s ‘Meaning’ (‘A great

<sup>17</sup> E.J. Gwynn and W.J. Purton, *The Monastery of Tallaght: Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy Volume XIX, Section C, No.5* (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis & Co, Ltd; London: Williams and Norgate, 1911), pp. 158-159.

one has put his faith in “meaning”) and Yeats’s ‘The Tower’ (‘another in “Poet’s imaginings”’), both high-pitched metaphysical statements. Heaney claims of his own ‘faith’:

Mine for now I put  
In steady-handedness maintained  
In books against its vanishing. (*HC* 77)

He offers the humble self-portrait of the artist who only wishes to persevere. The grammatical tense of ‘for now’ and the implicit reference to Macóige (‘steady-handedness’) further suggests that even *this* faith is qualified. Non-attachment is therefore twofold in this poem: the first manifestation is the school instruction which recognises the fleeting nature of the human and the vain delusions of ownership, and the second is the recognition of egotistical convictions disguised as intellectual ambition.

Letting go of worldly things is also a major part of ‘A Kite for Aibhín’, a translation of Giovanni Pascoli which closes Heaney’s overarching narrative with intimations of artistic completion infused with the intensification of self-transcendence through a willingness to let go of the ownership inherent to literary authorhood. With an opening sentence which conjures otherworldliness (‘Air from another life and time and place’), the first three stanzas are laced with allusions to Heaney’s concerns from earlier stages in his oeuvre. Heaney combines ‘Anahorish’ (*Wintering Out*) and ‘Exposure’ (*North*) in presenting himself as flying a kite on ‘Anahorish Hill to scan the blue, | Back in that field to launch our long-tailed comet’ (*HC* 85). In ‘Anahorish’, Heaney describes the locale as his ‘place of clear water’ (*WO* 16); in ‘Exposure’, the ‘comet’s pulsing rose’ (*N* 73) is the major symbol of the transcendent. The description of the kite in the sky gives the impression of the living spirit of the human being who holds it: ‘Pale blue heavenly air is supporting | A white wing beating high against the breeze’. In ‘A Kite for Michael and Christopher’ (*Station Island*), where the soul is in the clouds: ‘the string that sags and ascends, | weigh like a furrow assumed into the heavens’ (*SI* 44). The kite becomes an objective correlative for the soul, with the collapsed

disjunction between subject and object: ‘my hand is like a spindle | Unspooling, the kite a thin-stemmed flower’ (*HC* 85). Here Heaney evokes ‘The Spoonbait’, where the soul is ‘risen and free and spooling out of nowhere’ (*HL* 21). It also obliquely recalls ‘Unwinding’ from ‘Sweeney Redivivus’, where ‘twine unravels to the very end’ and brings the lesson that ‘from there on everything | is going to be learning’ (*SI* 99). The trajectory of the kite is ever upwards (‘Climbing and carrying, carrying farther, higher’):

The longing in the breast and planted feet  
And gazing face and heart of the kite flier  
Until string breaks and—separate, elate—

The kite takes off, itself alone, a windfall. (*HC* 85).

Here is the moment when the soul is detached from possessions and affections. The heart opens to the experience of release; the broken string echoes the snapped line of poem xlv of ‘Squarings’, where the moment of admission that there is no afterlife is a moment of abrupt dislocation (‘like a caught line snapping’; *ST* 104). St John of the Cross, who Heaney translated in ‘Station Island’ as a means by which to refocus his attention on the quest for union with pure Reality, describes how the soul must become detached in this way:

The soul that is attached to anything, however much good there may be in it, will not arrive at the liberty of divine union. For whether it be a strong wire rope or a slender and delicate thread that holds the bird, it matters not, if it really holds fast for, until the chord be broken, the bird cannot fly. So the soul, held by the bonds of human affections, however slight they may be, cannot, while they may last, make its way to God.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> St John of the Cross, quoted in Aldous Huxley, ‘Mortification, Non-Attachment, Right Livelihood’, *The Perennial Philosophy*, p. 122.

The narrative of the seeker after enlightenment that runs through Heaney's poetry is completed by an image of the kind of deliberate self-transcendence described here by St John of the Cross. Through the medium of translation the poet attains the terminal release from the immediate experience of the self which permits him to conceive of his death as being inscribed into the annals of his work against the near-mythological landscape of Anahorish.

### 8.3. A Not Unwelcoming Emptiness: Death and Completion

There is ‘no next-time-round’ (*ST* 55), Heaney avers in ‘Lightenings’, a conviction he maintains throughout his approach to the theme of mortality in *District and Circle* and *Human Chain*. There is critical consensus that this is the case, though Rand Brandes has offered the anomalous view that Heaney experiences, in both volumes, ‘nothing less than a radical readjustment and transformative revaluation of life before and after death’.<sup>1</sup> Evidence for that interpretation seems hard to find, and Brandes fails to specify *what* outlook the poet allegedly readjusts or transforms. Heaney does not stop thinking that there is a definite crossing between life and death, a fact about his eschatological beliefs that he straightforwardly accepts; ‘death is not proud’, as Magdalena Kay argues, ‘and neither is the poet’.<sup>2</sup> Does this mean that Heaney reneged on the challenge to defy death set out in the Ellmann lectures and ‘Joy or Night’, in which he celebrates Yeats’s blend of scepticism and supernatural faith? Colm Tóibín has noted that, while Heaney’s idealism in prose rebels against earthly limits, the late poems are ‘more hushed in the presence of mortality, more open to the idea of loss as something pure’.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Andrew J. Auge’s Heideggerian approach shows that Heaney’s late attitude does not aspire to a Yeatsian heroism of self-sufficiency but instead offers an affirmation of ‘human connections—the bonds of care linking the living and the dead—that allow death to be faced, and survived’.<sup>4</sup> By survival Auge means the act of honouring the memory of the dead, rather than aspiring to personal existence in a transcendental afterlife. It is certainly right to emphasise the differences

<sup>1</sup> Rand Brandes, ‘The Poetics of Reverie and Revelation in the Last Poems’, p. 338.

<sup>2</sup> Magdalena Kay, ‘Death and Everyman: Imagining a “Not Unwelcoming Emptiness”’, p. 67

<sup>3</sup> Colm Tóibín, ‘Review of *Human Chain*’, *The Guardian*, 21 August 2010  
<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/aug/21/seamus-heaney-human-chain-review>> [accessed January 2019].

<sup>4</sup> Andrew J. Auge, ‘Surviving Death in Heaney’s *Human Chain*’, *‘The Soul Exceeds Its Circumstances’: The Later Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, edited by E. O’Brien (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2016), pp. 29–48, p.30.



between Heaney and Yeats in these contexts, not least because of the disparities clarified by ‘Hermit Songs’; but there are also similarities between the two poets, for example in their representation of death as peaceful, which highlight the true pattern of cause and effect whereby Heaney ‘faces’ and accepts mortality alongside his poetic affirmations of human bonds. The late poems are not always vehicles of enlightenment and visitation, like the second part of *Seeing Things*, but often transcriptions of founded beliefs and experiences in light of this acceptance, as well as ostensibly conflicting speculative and transcendent urges which suggest he did not renege on the spiritual intellect’s great work so much as complete it, like Caedmon after his angel stint: ‘Unabsorbed in what he had to do | But doing it perfectly’ (SL 41).

The world of *District and Circle* is haunted everywhere by signs of decay and mortality that provide opportunities to witness Heaney’s spirit of acceptance. The fact of human mortality is unflinchingly depicted by ‘The Lift’, a poem which, in its celebration of cultural changes in Ireland which saw women begin to lead in funerals, offers privileged access to the deathbed of his sister, Ann. Resembling a scene from ‘a Breton *pardon*’, the speaker walks among ‘remote familiar women and men in caps | Walking four abreast’; unlike ‘Casualty’, where mourners are described as a homogeneous group of ‘quiet walkers | And sideways talkers’ (FW 22), this speaker is now fully part of a familial group, as a helicopter clarifies in its ‘articulated whops’: ‘and afterwards | Awareness of the sound of our own footsteps’ (DC 42). Nobody, this image impresses on the reader, thinks about anything other than the deceased. After this point of focused clarity, Ann’s dying moments are recorded with grim accuracy:

I remembered her aghast,  
Foetal, shaking, sweating, shrunk, wet-haired,

A beaten breath, a misting mask, the flash  
Of one wild glance, like ghost surveillance  
From behind a gleam of helicopter glass.

A lifetime, then deathtime: reticence  
Keeping us together when together,  
All declaration deemed outspokenness. (DC 42)

Anyone who has been to a deathbed will recognise this unnervingly vivid scene of the human body in its final throes: the ‘one wild glance’ captures the inexplicable transformation of a loved one, a change in their face which momentarily—though indelibly—estranges them from us. Enlightened living, as the Tibetan Buddhists remind us, requires us to face and outstare the darkness of dying. For the poet and his family, death is subsequently present everywhere in the earth and its seasons:

Weather, in the end, would say our say.  
Reprises of griefs in summer’s clearest mornings,  
Children’s deaths in snowdrops and the may,

Whole requiems at the sight of plants and gardens... (DC 43)

Rather than prayers for the departed soul, bittersweet grief is worked through at a natural pace; there is no attempt to control or manipulate emotion. It should not go unnoticed, moreover, that the poem is written in the three-lined stanza form that Heaney will primarily use for his meditations on his mortality in *Human Chain*.

Degeneration is the central image of ‘On the Spot’. The poem depicts the experience of gathering eggs, a trip which was once a source of excitement but becomes an encounter with death:

A cold clutch, a whole nestful, all but hidden  
In last year’s autumn leaf-mould, and I knew  
By the mattness and the stillness of them, rotten,  
Making death sweat of a morning dew  
That didn’t so much shine the shells as damp them. (DC 54)

This is a far cry from when ‘silver lamé shivered on the Bann’ (ST 108). It is a scene of decay, one which naturally repulses us. Disappointment is certainly evident in the speaker’s tone, but a determination to face and accept the truth distinguishes his attitude. The poem invites contrasts with ‘Death of a Naturalist’, where the young boy observes frogspawn: ‘I

knew | That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it' (*DN* 15). Childlike fear has now been replaced by adult detachment, as the speaker, who is 'used to finding warm eggs', discovers instead

This sudden polar stud  
And stigma and dawn-stone circle chill  
In my mortified right hand, proof positive  
Of what conspired on the spot to addle  
Matter in its planetary stand-off. (*DC* 54)

Just as the young boy feared grasping frogs, this speaker's hand, with the connotations of the crucifix, is snatched by death: 'mortified', in this context, evokes gangrene or necrosis, while 'addle', which refers to the egg that becomes rotten and produces no chick, blends with hints of positivism ('proof positive', 'Matter in its planetary stand-off'). Yet the speaker remains unperturbed and unhurried, his air of acceptance making us feel that contemplating the worst can, paradoxically, generate a strange sense of reassurance. This is just how life, and death, is.

The relationship between Heaney's mindset of acceptance and the spirituality of non-attachment within *District and Circle* is illustrated by 'The Blackbird of Glanmore', a poem which apprehends, through its central out-of-body experience, the ever-presence of death in the midst of life. As I stated in the previous chapter, when the speaker focuses, under the watchful eye of the bird, on his breathing and surroundings ('I park, pause, take heed. | Breathe. Just breathe and sit'), he recalls lines from *The Cure at Troy*: 'I want away | To the house of death' (*DC* 75). When we pause to consider why this exclamation comes to Heaney's mind, it is possible that he is feeling, as we all do from time to time, a momentary impulse of total capitulation, a death-wish borne of mental fatigue. It is not a self-centred thought, given that the poet also thinks of his brother Christopher and the neighbour who claimed to have witnessed a bird on the roof for weeks before the fatal accident: "I said nothing at the time || But I never liked yon bird' (*DC* 75-76). Magdalena Kay asks whether it

is right to be in love with a spectre that summons the memory of dead relatives.<sup>5</sup> But such ethical considerations are not really the concern of this poem; it recognises, whatever the moral standards of society, the genuine feelings of the speaker of the poem. Viewed in this way, his openness to morbid thoughts and the inevitability of extinction is closely related to the experience of non-attachment when he emerges from the car and sees himself from a bird's eye view as a 'shadow on raked gravel' (*DC* 76). This 'shortlived' out of body perspective leads to affirmation:

Hedge-hop, I am absolute  
For you, your ready talkback,  
Your picky, nervy gold-beak—  
On the grass when I arrive,

In the ivy when I leave. (*DC* 76)

The blackbird is death; accepting mortality as a necessary condition in 'the house of life' ('I am absolute | For you'): he poet appropriates the word from the opening scene of Act III of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, in which the Duke encourages the imprisoned Claudio, who seeks clemency, to imagine death as better than life: 'Be absolute for death'.<sup>6</sup> Brandes has argued that Heaney thus rejects resignation to death,<sup>7</sup> but the opposite view is more accurate; the elusive but resident blackbird becomes 'the little bird of death' (*SI* 113), hence Heaney's response aligning with Claudio's: 'To sue to live, I find I seek to die, | And, seeking to die, find life'.<sup>8</sup> As a transitional poem, the last in its volume, it paves the way for extended meditations on death in Heaney's last book.

Heaney claimed that neither death nor his stroke were at the forefront of his mind in writing the poems of *Human Chain*: "I didn't have such a strong sense of mortality running

<sup>5</sup> Magdalena Kay, 'Death and Everyman: Imagining a "Not Unwelcoming Emptiness"', p. 60.

<sup>6</sup> William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, III. I (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), p. 2072.

<sup>7</sup> Rand Brandes, 'The Poetics of Reverie and Revelation in the Last Poems', p. 338.

<sup>8</sup> William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, III. I, p. 2072.

through the book until the reviews began to appear. It daunted me. I thought, this sounds like he's writing his own obituaries'.<sup>9</sup> As for the relevance of his illness, he said: 'I suppose [the volume] was aided by the shock of the stroke' (ibid). But both make it easy to see why the poet considered this last collection 'more naked', and why he was 'much more tentative talking about it than other books' (ibid). As, nodding to Eliot, a younger contemporary put it, Heaney is much possessed by death in this volume.<sup>10</sup> Despite his public comments, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that there is a definite sense that the poet understood that this would be his final volume: with extinction no longer an abstract concept on the horizon but, like the blackbird, living in close proximity, he produced some of his most poignant and evocative spiritual images, completing his mythography with commensurate steadiness and clarity of purpose.

The opening poem of *Human Chain* conveys the kind of hypersensitivity to being alive which only a sense of encroaching death can induce:

Had I not been awake I would have missed it,  
A wind that rose and whirled until the roof  
Pattered with quick leaves off the sycamore

And got me up, the whole of me a-patter,  
Alive and ticking like an electric fence:  
Had I not been awake I would have missed it,

It came and went so unexpectedly  
And almost it seemed dangerously,  
Returning like an animal to the house,

A courier blast that there and then  
Lapsed ordinary. But not ever  
After. And not now. (*HC* 3)

<sup>9</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in Eimear Flanagan 'Seamus Heaney: I live in panic over the next poem', *BBC News Northern Ireland*, 23 September 2010 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-11400255>> [accessed March 2018].

<sup>10</sup> Nick Laird, 'Review of *Human Chain*', *The Telegraph*, 2 September 2010 <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/7977782/Human-Chain-by-Seamus-Heaney-review.html>> [accessed September 2018].

As an entry point into the book, this recasts ‘Lightenings, I’, with its insight that there ‘is no next-time-round’ and its vision of ‘Unroofed scope. Knowledge-freshening wind’ (*ST* 55).

The repetition of the opening line draws attention to the fact that the poet is awake at night, raising questions as to why he is not asleep in the first place. Things are not quite right. Read in the context of Heaney’s stroke, the experience seems somewhat like a panic attack, the fear of something dangerous outside and the wind sounding a premonition of the death-summons.

Heaney’s diction also evokes Emily Dickinson:

A Wind that rose  
Though not a Leaf  
In any Forest stirred  
But with itself did cold engage  
Beyond the Realm of Bird -  
A Wind that woke a lone Delight  
Like Separation's Swell  
Restored in Arctic Confidence  
To the Invisible.<sup>11</sup>

Beyond obvious similarities, Dickinson’s poem offers terms with which to read Heaney’s concluding line: recounting the extraordinary experience, he is not only daunted, he has been wakened to ‘a lone Delight’.

Heaney’s sense that his own life was nearing its end also causes him to recall and recast his mother and father. ‘Album’ depicts his parents’ honeymoon on the coast of Northern Ireland:

It’s winter at the seaside where they’ve gone  
For the wedding meal. And I am at the table,  
Uninvited, ineluctable. (*HC* 5)

The littoral setting contains a literal image: Heaney does not, as it has been claimed, manage to insert himself into the ‘primal scene’ of his conception,<sup>12</sup> nor does he read himself

<sup>11</sup> Emily Dickinson, ‘A Wind That Rose’, *Collected Poems* (Canada: Little, Brown, and Company, 1958), p. 551.

<sup>12</sup> Hugh Haughton, ‘Seamus Heaney: First and Last Things’, *The Irish Review* (1986-), No. 49 / 50, *Seamus Heaney* (Winter-Spring 2014 | 2015), pp. 194-207, p. 197.

retrospectively into the circumstances of his parents' lives: he is actually 'at the table'. The records show that his parents were married on 8 November 1938, which indicates that his mother was approximately four months pregnant when she got married.<sup>13</sup> Heaney does not, of course, remember being in the womb, which is part of the message of the poem: death is a return to that prior nothingness. Memories of separation from his parents are also made more painful by looming mortality. On his first day at St Columb's College, this leavetaking is intensely painful, with the poet feeling they were 'all the more together' for having had to 'turn and walk away, as close | In the leaving (or closer) as in the getting'. The intensity of the experience is couched within Columcille's *Fil Súil Nglais* ('*A grey eye will look back*'; *HC* 5), a terminal scene which reemerges later in the volume. In 'Uncoupled', a diptych with one section each for mother and father, beginning with the same terms ('Who is this'), Heaney's parents are lost by the son in different ways. Heaney's mother is carrying the pan from the ash pit, 'weighty, full to the brim | With whitish dust and flakes still sparking hot', imagery associated with death in 'Two Lorries' (*SL* 13-14); twice the speaker uses the verb 'proceeds' to describe her walk, which adds to the finality of the moment when he has 'lost sight of her | Where the worn path turns behind the henhouse' (*HC* 9). In the second section, his father moves through the cattle pen and shouts towards him: 'Waving and calling something I cannot hear'; among the 'lowing and roaring, lorries revving | At the far end of the yard', the dealers eventually shout to Heaney's father so 'that his eyes leave mine and I know | The pain of loss before I know the term' (*HC* 10). Being reconciled with mortality does not mean that the ache of loss disappears.

The final image of Heaney's father in the volume and the oeuvre as a whole comes in 'The Butts'. Recalling how he searched the pockets his father's suits hung in the wardrobe,

<sup>13</sup> General Register Office Northern Ireland M|1938|n1|2423|13|97.

the young boy comes upon ‘chaff cocoons’, the ‘paperiness’ of which he connects to ‘the last days’ when:

we must learn to reach well in beneath  
Each meagre armpit  
To lift and sponge him,

One on either side,  
Feeling his lightness,  
Having to dab and work

Closer than anybody liked  
But having, for all that,  
To keep working. (*HC* 12)

It is a seminal moment in the son’s life when he must look after his dying father, particularly in this kind of uncomfortably intimate contact. Elsewhere, in ‘Album’, Heaney recalls helping his father do up his trouser buttons because he was very drunk, and later, in his ‘last week’, helping him ‘to the bathroom’: ‘my right arm | Taking the webby weight of his underarm’ (*HC* 6). Now the tone is more sombre, and it may be that Heaney is channelling his own experiences of private care after the stroke: in *Stepping Stones*, he speaks of being embarrassed when he was in the stroke unit of the Royal in Donnybrook (*SS* 461-2). As a stroke survivor, Heaney surely saw himself in this image of his father, like he did in ‘District and Circle’ (*DC* 19). The enlightenment here is a realisation of our common humanity in frailness and need.

The morning of the stroke and the subsequent rehabilitation constitute the subject-matter of ‘Chanson d’Aventure’. Taking its epitaph from Donne’s ‘The Ecstasy’ (‘Love’s mysteries in souls do grow, | But yet the body is his book’), the first section of the poem shows Heaney flat on his back in the ambulance while his beloved Marie tends to him. Like Donne’s couple, their postures are ‘all the journey still the same, | Everything and nothing said’:

Our eyebeams threaded laser-fast, no transport  
Ever like it until then, in the sunlit cold



Of a Sunday morning ambulance  
When we might, O my love, have quoted Donne  
On love on hold, body and soul apart. (HC 13)

A frightening experience, the stroke, however, stimulates mixed emotions. Heaney, like Donne, conceives the body as a vehicle for contemplation of the soul's linking together with another: 'faculties which sense may reach and apprehend'.<sup>14</sup> There is primitive fear, and yet life also seems suddenly very sweet; the enlightenment of the poem resides in what he depicts as an incomparable and unprecedented spiritual experience: a 'transport'. This section, and the poem as a whole, is a prime example of the pattern of cause and effect in which death precedes the visionary image: it is grace *in extremis*, illumination choosing the poet rather the other way around; the metaphor of the body and soul, with its intimations of deepened spiritual union between husband and wife, has been inspired by encroaching mortality. The second section of the poem reveals Heaney's contemplation of mortality. Dwelling on the word 'apart', the poet's mind is drawn back to memories of the sexton Malachy Boyle who 'outrolled' the funeral bell '*In illo tempore* in Bellaghy' just as Heaney had 'toll'd' the college bell in Derry, the latter verb clinching the reference to Donne's famous *momento mori*: 'never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee'.<sup>15</sup> Heaney refers to 'the heel of my once capable | Warm hand', an echo of Keats's 'living hand' which, like in 'On the Spot' ('my mortified right hand', DC 54), actually connotes lifeless flesh. As the poet's hand lays 'flop-heavy as a bellpull', there is an ecstasy drawn from the intensification of life as it is lived near death: 'our gaze ecstatic and bisected | By a hooked-up drip-feed to the cannula' (HC 14). A variation on the Donnean imagery of metaphysical eyebeams, this further conveys the precious beauty of human warmth. The third section of the poem allows

<sup>14</sup> John Donne, 'The Ecstasy', *The Major Works* edited by John Carey (Oxford: OUP, 2000), p. 121-122.

<sup>15</sup> John Donne, 'Meditation XVII', *Devotions* (1623), quoted in John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 62.

us into the rehabilitation suite where Heaney learned to walk again.<sup>16</sup> Comparing himself with the ancient charioteer at Delphi whose left hand hangs from his wrist, Heaney describes his ‘gaze ahead | Empty as the space where the team should be’ and suggests that his ‘straight-backed posture’ is ‘like my own | Doing physio in the corridor’. Like in childhood with two buckets (‘Terminus’, *HL* 5), Heaney aims for balance between ‘two shafts, another’s hand on mine’, and like the ambulance journey, he has been acutely sensitised to the pulses of life: ‘Each slither of the share, each stone hit | Registered like a pulse in the timbered grips’ (*HC* 15). The empty stare of the post-traumatic state is conditioned by the emptiness of death, one which reaffirms just how precious and precarious life is.

The way in which acceptance of death can cleanse perception by providing contextualization is evident in Heaney’s imagery of human connection. ‘Miracle’ combines the experience of the stroke with the biblical parable of the crippled man, but Heaney refocuses our attention: rather than dwelling on the moment of healing, the poet, drawing upon the morning of his medical crisis, celebrates ‘the ones who have known him all along | And carry him in’ (*HC* 16). But the title poem of the volume frames philanthropic effort within the inescapable fact of death, focusing on memories of the burdensome work of lifting heavy sacks:

Nothing surpassed

That quick unburdening, backbreak’s truest payback,  
A letting go which will not come again.  
Or it will, once. And for all. (*HC* 17)

Heaney imagines the release from burden and acknowledges the inevitability of extinction, associating it with ‘letting go’, a release from the pain endured in life, as Auge writes: it is

<sup>16</sup> See Eleanor Wachtel, ‘An Interview with Seamus Heaney’, *Brick*, 80. 2011 <<https://brickmag.com/an-interview-with-seamus-heaney/>> [accessed November 2017].

the final caesura that ‘augments death’s finality by gesturing towards the binding power of its universality’.<sup>17</sup> ‘Augments’, but more importantly, welcomes.

That this sense of the ephemerality of things enhances perception of beauty is the subject of ‘The Baler’, a poem in which Heaney paints a pastoral vision of Wicklow. As he had once done many years before, in the first of his ‘Glanmore Sonnets’, the speaker of this poem evokes the rhythmic sounds of farm machinery; but rather than intimations of the transcendent, now Heaney is fully alive to the beauty of reality:

All day the clunk of a baler  
Ongoing, cardiac-dull,  
So taken for granted  
It was evening before I came to

To what I was hearing  
And missing: summer's richest hours  
As they had been to begin with,  
Fork-lifted, sweated-through

And nearly rewarded enough  
By the giddied-up race of a tractor  
At the end of the day  
Last-lapping a hayfield. (*HC* 23)

Enlightenment comes in the speaker seeing afresh bucolic splendour; in *Electric Light*, Heaney employed the pastoral as a beautiful measure against an uglier reality of spiritual crisis on a national and political level (‘Glanmore Eclogue’), but this vision of agricultural life is more Keatsian, an enamoured celebration like the ‘mellow fruitfulness’ of ‘To Autumn’.<sup>18</sup> Like Keats’s poem, the beauty is contextualised by mortality, as the feeling induced by this vision reminds Heaney of Derek Hill, who said, the ‘last time he sat at our table’, that:

He could bear no longer to watch

The sun going down

<sup>17</sup> Andrew J. Auge, ‘Surviving Death in Heaney’s *Human Chain*’, p. 34.

<sup>18</sup> John Keats, ‘To Autumn’, *The Poetical Works of John Keats* (New York: James Millar, 1871), pp. 264-5, p. 264.

And asking please to be put  
With his back to the window. (HC 25)

Heaney and Hill were both artists, which implies a shared responsiveness and sense of obligation to respond creatively to this unbearable beauty. The request reflects the painter's downing of his own artistic tools, a version of letting go which the poet may also be anticipating.

Paradoxically, Heaney's willingness to accept the process of decay in this volume does not preclude the impulse towards transcendence, as 'A Herbal' demonstrates. Like the concise, gnomic instruction of the *Tao Te Ching*, the fifth section of the poem employs personification of graveyard grass which never 'rests in peace':

"See me? it says.  
"The wind

Has me well rehearsed  
In the ways of the world.

Unstable is good.  
Permission granted!

Go, then, citizen  
Of the wind.  
Go with the flow." (HC 37)

Death haunts these landscapes: in the grass verges, the 'dead here are borne | Toward the future' (HC 38), and when 'the funeral bell tolls | The grass is all a-tremble' (HC 15). But this realisation of oneself as a constituent of actuality—that one was inseparable from reality ('I had my existence. I was there. | Me in place and the place in me' (HC 43-44)—prefaces integration of organic processes with which the transcendent impulse is inextricably bound up:

Where can it be found again,  
An elsewhere world, beyond

Maps and atlases,  
Where all is woven into

And of itself, like a nest  
Of crosshatched grass blades? (*HC* 44)

Heaney's rhetorical question about an 'elsewhere world' suggests an irrational, momentary desire for a next-time-round. But the question is deliberately left unanswered, because—for all his foreknowledge—the possible next time round remains out of bounds.

This correlation between the transcendent impulse and the proximity of death is also evident in the speculative playfulness of 'Loughanure', an elegy for Colin Middleton, whose painting of the eponymous Gaeltacht area inspires the poem. In another speculative, unanswered question, speaker asks of the artwork: 'So this is what an afterlife can come to?' (*HC* 59). Teasingly, Heaney draws mythic parallels with foundational Western imagery: he begins with Dante and Plato's Er who watched the travels of 'immortal souls', and then invokes Odysseus, who chose the 'destiny of a private man', and Orpheus, who chose 'rebirth as a swan' (*HC* 60). The third section of the poem begins with a conjunction which suggests that Heaney is nevertheless still responding to—and assessing his beliefs in the context of—the spiritual command set out by his school in Derry ('Seek ye first the Kingdom', *HC* 5):

And did I seek the Kingdom? Will the Kingdom  
Come? The idea of it there,  
Behind its scrim since font and fontanel,

Breaks like light or water (*HC* 60)

Feelings of 'giddiness' induced by this idea remind the poet of Middleton's notorious technique of spreading his legs and looking at his subject upside down from between them:

his inverted face contorting

Like an arse-kisser's in some vision of the damned  
Until he'd straighten, turn back, cock an eye  
And stand with the brush at arm's length, readying. (*HC* 60-61)

The painter is seeking ‘the wonders of defamiliarization’, as Heaney described it in his 1984 article ‘The Boule Miche of the North’:<sup>19</sup> the ‘mystery of the hard and fast’ is ‘unveiled’ (*HC* 60) when habitual modes of vision are replaced by enlightening new angles on reality. In the final section, the poet, in his by-now familiar position behind the steering wheel, transports the reader to Loughanure in the present day, with Mount Errigal:

On the skyline the one constant thing  
As I drive unhomesick, unbelieving, through  
A grant-aided, renovated scene, trying

To remember the Greek word signifying  
A world restored completely: that would include  
Hannah Mhór’s turkey-chortle of Irish,

The swan at evening over *Loch an Iubhair*,  
Clarnico Murray’s hard iced caramels  
A penny an ounce over Sharkey’s counter (*HC* 62)

It is highly likely that Heaney encountered the forgotten Greek term in Milosz’s ‘Bells of Winter’: ‘Yet I belong to those who believe in *apokatastasis*. | That word promises reverse movement’.<sup>20</sup> Accepting death is not mutually exclusive to this desire; the transcendent desire cannot be disentangled from these choicest of memories. The poet may not have been among those believers, but the spiritual condition of ‘unbelieving’, as Daniel Tobin writes, demonstrates that a ‘desire to remember in the context of this poem of unbelief is as significant as the poet’s lack of belief, and without that desire Heaney’s poetry would lack the dramatic necessity as well as most of its most imaginative resources’.<sup>21</sup>

That dramatic quality manifests itself most eerily in ‘The door was open and the house was dark’, an elegy for David Hammond that, as Heaney subsequently told Marie-

<sup>19</sup> Seamus Heaney, ‘The Boule Miche of the North’, *Fortnight*, No. 207 (September, 1984), pp. 18-21, p. 19.

<sup>20</sup> Czeslaw Milosz, ‘Bells in Winter’, *Bells in Winter*, translated by Lillian Valee and Czeslaw Milosz (New York: Ecco Press, 1978), p.69.

<sup>21</sup> Andrew J. Auge, ‘Surviving Death in Heaney’s *Human Chain*’, p.45; Eugene O’Brien, ‘The Door Stands Open’: Liminal Spaces in Later Heaney’, pp.367-368; Daniel Tobin, “‘Beyond Maps and Atlases’: Transfiguration and Immanence in the Later Poems of Seamus Heaney’, pp. 312-313.

Louise Muir, was originally ‘an extremely strange, haunting dream’ that he ‘just recorded in verse that rhymes’.<sup>22</sup> The singular quality of the poem is reflected by an archaism (which takes us away from this poet’s familiar mode of address): ‘The door was open and the house was dark, | Wherefore I called his name’. Unlike the echoing darkness of ‘Personal Helicon’, Heaney knows what to expect from this dark house: ‘I knew | The answer this time would be silence’. Rather than the trepidation which such a silence might otherwise induce in younger men or women, in his dream the older poet is drawn towards it: he is kept ‘standing listening while it grew | Backwards and down and out into the street’. The repeated conjunctions serve the conceit that the recollection is forming scene by scene, as the speaker notes ‘(I remember now)’, which gives the poem the quality of an unfolding drama happening in real time. The parenthesis gives the speaker assurance in concluding his memory:

I felt, for the first time there and then, a stranger,  
Intruder almost, wanting to take flight

Yet well aware that here there was no danger,  
Only withdrawal, a not unwelcoming  
Emptiness, as in a midnight hangar

On an overgrown airfield in late summer. (*HC* 81)

Trespassing on the world of the dead, Heaney, though still alive, enters a familiar place where he is not yet supposed to be (or not to be). Like ‘The Baler’, death is associated with the warmth of harvest-time, but the striking phrase here is ‘a not unwelcoming | Emptiness’. The introspection and hesitancy implied by this expression, with the added intimation of calmness and control in the term ‘withdrawal’, is typical of the poet’s late compliant attitude towards mortality. A transcribed dream in triplets with vivid ghostly strangeness, the poem’s

<sup>22</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in Eimear Flanagan, ‘Seamus Heaney: “I live in panic over the next poem”’, *BBC News*, 23 September 2010 < <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/mobile/uk-northern-ireland-11400255> > [accessed March 2018].

sense that death is a peaceful state recalls Yeats's 'Cuchulain Comforted', where sitting down to sew with the others, the poet is given a final explanation of his new surroundings:

"Now must we sing and sing the best we can,  
But first you must be told our character:  
Convicted cowards all, by kindred slain

"Or driven from home and left to die in fear."  
They sang, but had nor human tunes nor words,  
Though all was done in common as before;

They had changed their throats and had the throats of birds.<sup>23</sup>

Heaney described this poem 'a strange ritual of surrender, a rite of passage from life into death, but a rite whose meaning is 'subsumed into song, into the otherness of art'. Yeats, Heaney concluded, demonstrates sympathy with the weak and strong of this earth (*P* 113). This stands as appropriate commentary for Heaney's own dream poem.

As the volume progresses towards its conclusion, Heaney's preparation for retirement—from his literary work and from this world—becomes increasingly explicit. 'In the Attic' is a self-portrait of 'a man marooned | In his own loft', like Jim Hawkins 'aloft in the cross-trees | Of *Hispaniola*' (*HC* 82). The memory of his grandfather's 'voice a-waver like the draft-prone screen' provides Heaney with a precedent to his own condition:

His memory of the name a-waver too,  
His mistake perpetual, once and for all,  
Like the single splash when Israel's body fell. (*HC* 83)

Eternity and death echo in the splash, just as the darkness did in the well over forty years earlier in 'Personal Helicon' (*DN* 57). The poet adopts a more direct mode of address in the fourth and final section of the poem:

As I age and blank on names,  
As my uncertainty on stairs  
Is more and more the light-headedness

<sup>23</sup> W.B. Yeats, 'Cuchulain Comforted', *Collected Poems*, p.395.



Of a cabin boy's first time on the rigging,  
As the memorable bottoms out  
Into the irretrievable,

It's not that I can't imagine still  
That slight untoward rupture and world-tilt  
As a wind freshened and the anchor weighed. (HC 84)

This passage centres on the 'irretrievable', which assents to the inevitability of death; it also contradicts *apokatastasis*, the restoration of all things. He is imaginatively responsive to sensation, which—although characterised by loss and disorientation—is still conceived as a new journey to be embarked upon with a sense of anticipation.

When Seamus Heaney's final collection of poems comes to its close in 'A Kite for Aibhín', he finishes with a picture which he had been contemplating for a long time. The primary anticipation of release from this life, with 'the breast and planted feet | And gazing faze and heart of the kite flier', is inextricably bound up with the final attainment of non-attachment when the string breaks and the kite 'takes off, itself alone, a windfall' (HC 85). But if the poem is a supreme moment of letting go, it is also one of controlled deliberation. We know that Heaney first heard about the source-text, Pascoli's 'L'Aquilone', in 2001, which is when he was invited to receive an honorary degree at University of Urbino. Heaney's host was Gabriella Morisco, who showed the poet where Pascoli's poem is based. She writes:

Years later Seamus Heaney reminded me that, just after our walk on Cappuchin Hill, I had found a postcard for him of a painting that showed a boy flying his kite outside the city gates, a postcard he kept long afterwards because he told me, "I had not finished with that image of the boy and his plaything".<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Gabriella Morisco, 'Two Poets and a Kite: Seamus Heaney and Giovanni Pascoli', *Linguæ et*, No. 1, 2013, pp. 35-45, p. 36; see also, Marco Sonzogni, 'Note on Heaney and Pascoli', *Irish Studies South*: Issue. 1, Article 13 <<https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/iss/vol1/iss1/13>> [accessed April 2019].

The poet had found the image for his poetic obituary, and in the end he authorised his own release—an enlightened act if ever there was one.

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